Story Archive

Here you can read all of the archived chapters of the ongoing Valenth storyline. Major parts of the story are seperated into books, collections of multiple related chapters.
Unlike 'real' books, Valenth story chapters are usually no more than a few pages in length each, allowing for quick reading and introduction of new adoptables in Valenth's internet-based format.

Volume I : Reflection

- Book I - Welcome To Valenth
- Book II - Spark
- Book III - The Ballad of Nigel
- Book IV - Scenes From Daily Life
- Book V - Whispers from the Past
- Book VI - Legacy of the Ancients
- Book VII - The Broken Silence

Volume II: Divide

- Book I - Degrees of Separation
- Book II - The Tales We Tell (Pending)

Book I Prologue

Citizens Be Warned; Dangerous Crystal Threatens All Life on Valenth!

Chances are you've seen it in action; powering zeppelins, portable appliances, even the wildly-popular varanius-model household automatons manufactured by the MIRACLE Energy Company.

Dreamshards. Applauded as a revolutionary new energy source for a new age, these tiny crystal pieces are brimming with energy.
Most dreamshards never require replacement; surely, they are, indeed, *miraculous!*

WhatMIRACLEand the Silent Rose Organization don't want you to know is that dreamshards are tiny fragments of the Fatis Mirajin-- a massive stone hidden away within Chimre that even now threatens to irreversibly corrupt and destroy the natural world!

It doesn't end there, either.
Recent studies by highly-esteemed researchers have uncovered an even more ghastly discovery; the Fatis Mirajin's energy is not only capable of corrupting and disfiguring all it touches, *but it may be capable of destroying your soul!*

Vitae is the essence that grants life to all beings; when a creature is born, it is granted a small amount which fades away again when death occurs, returning to the planet to be purified and begin the cycle anew.

The Fatis Mirajin's energy-- which is very much present in dreamshards, depleted or otherwise-- corrupts Vitae in a manner that ensures it can *never be recycled*.
This eats away at Valenth's supply of Vitae, slowly but surely-- a *finite* supply!

Worst of all, the Fatis Mirajin MAY BE RADIATING ITS ENERGY ACROSS THE WORLD.

Beware; you, your loved ones, and even the whole of Valenth may be in grave danger!

If you suspect you may be suffering from Mirajin poisoning, please contact your nearest Firestarters Center right away for assistance.
Regular physicians cannot help you, *and may be allied with the Silent Rose!*

Viaan vis, and beware!
-The Firestarters

Book I Chapter 1 : The Evanescent

Carl Christoph Museum of Science and History
Gier, South Dreamsong

Pigeons settled along the rooftops and gargoyles, cooing and clicking contentedly as they preened under a brilliant azure sky, Valenth'stwin suns illuminating and warming the crisp November afternoon.

Elliot Christoph gazed longingly out of her office window as she sorted paperwork, tucking an unopened check away into her desk for later. Once these files were taken care of, she could have her lunch break and enjoy the day for a few minutes as she went to deposit it; even with the sponsorship of the Dremish government, the Museum was always eager to accept donations from private benefactors to help fund their research and expeditions.

Especially when the donations were *so substantial.*

As Elliot returned to her work of signing documents and setting them aside, a soft *whoomph* and a large shadow flitting past the window caught her eye.
Raising an eyebrow, she paused to glance out again for just a moment-- watching several humanoid figures with shimmering white wings swoop fluidly past as the pigeons scattered in terror.

"*What in the...*"

The strange creatures settled upon the building just across the street, folding their wings and gesturing to one another at length; each was sleek and well-muscled, with long, twitching tails and odd masks hiding their faces from view.

Watching quietly, Elliot pressed a hand to her mouth as one of the winged people reached a hand out, wringing and tugging as though it had grasped a piece of the sky; a thin trail of magenta ichor dripped down into the street below from its claws.

Miraplasm.

Elliot groped blindly for her telephone, her eyes glued to the window as several more of the creatures arrived, surveying their fellow's work before the flock spread their wings in unison and scattered in all directions, leaving behind a tiny pink gash that seemed to float in the air like a figment of the imagination.
"Hello? Yes, it's Elliot Christoph, how do you do? At the risk of sounding cryptic... have you been watching the sky today?"

Sticky strands of miraplasm dribbled slowly out of the aetherhole as tiny, crystalline white feathers drifted in lazy circles towards the pavement below.

Book I Chapter 2 : Whitewing

Gier, South Dreamsong

Zeppelins floated sleepily through the skies over Gier, faint and distant like lost soap bubbles.

The winged things watched them; they watched the pigeons fleeing as they landed on the rooftops, and the people walking and talking far below on the street.
They watched the woman in the suit across the way, who watched back.

Turning to each other, they spoke without words, their great, white wings glowing brightly enough in the sunlight to rival the suns themselves. People compelled to glance up after hearing the scuffle of their feet or the beating of their wings would see only harsh sunglare for their trouble.

Except for the woman in the window.

Silently, they discussed amongst themselves what to do about her. *Nothing*, they finally agreed.
As satisfied as they could be, the Elder crept out to the ledge, reaching out to test the veil, grabbing hold of the world and tearing open a tiny hole that bled the essence of dreams. The others watched, nodding in approval-- with a bit of effort, this would do.

The woman in the window was gawking at them now. Together, they spread their wings and launched themselves into the air, scattering like the pigeons before them had done.
No one could get too curious about them, or what they were up to; they moved regroup nearby and discuss the next course of action.

The flock perched on a great clocktower, huddling together in a line to consider their surroundings and catch their breath.
The Elder lolled his tongue out from beneath his owl-shaped mask, scrubbing the mirajinous pink goo away from his claws with it as the others watched.
One of the creatures glanced curiously at his fellows before slipping off his mask, drawing in a deep breath of air, tangy-sharp with the factory smog and chemicals that had been a part of the industrial human city since it was founded years ago.

The winged things paused, turning their heads to watch him, sunlight scattering across the tiny, pearlescent scales of his all-too-human face.
He froze in turn, mask clasped tight in his clawed fingers, eyes open wide as he realized what he had done.

In an instant, he leapt to his feet, wings and arms spread, ready to fly, ready to *flee*--
-- but they grabbed him by his ankles and wrists and tail and wings, pulling him back, down onto the rusted steel walkway, pushing their masks up just high enough to reveal their mouths, dripping wet and full of teeth like blades.

As they devoured him, he dropped his rodent-faced mask, which rolled away from his spasming fingers and off of the tower, shattering into a thousand pieces on the pavement below and startling several passerby into gazing anxiously up into the sky.

Book I Chapter 3: Guardians of the Green

Whimsy Park, South Dreamsong

"You are *not* gonna believe this, sir."
"Then stop stalling and tell me, so I know what I'm disbelieving."

Several men and women shuffled in and out of the dense trees of Whimsy, climbing up upon sturdy branches to gaze out through the foliage with carefully constructed binoculars.
Just outside of Gier, they watched as strange, shining white creatures circled over the city like birds, occasionally landing atop the drifting passenger zeppelins, diving down into the streets, or congregating on rooftops, seeming to discuss something amongst themselves between moments of frivolity and silent, still watching.
"Iicarn."
"You're *shitting me* . Give me that!"
The *Aeneski* snatched the binoculars from his fellow, squinting through them and swearing. "Flamekeeper's arse, you're *not..!*"
"Question is *why*. Why are they back *now?* And why *Gier*?
It's a neutral city. I can't imagine there being anything the Rose couldn't just stroll in and pay for, let alone needing their flying lab-rats."
"Maybe it's not something physical they're seeking," the elven man snapped, tossing the binoculars back to the first with enough force that he nearly dropped them.
"I'm calling this in; those bastards showing up is enough cause for concern."
"Yessir."

Whimsy Camp sprung to life as Firestarters began taking notes, donning armor, filling quivers and ducking into tents, preparing for a possible attack.
They had set up here to observe the effects of the city's heavy industrialization on the local wildlife; with both coal-burning and miracrystal processing plants in the capitol city, chances were good that the flora and fauna would be visibly suffering.
Any data they gathered would have been valuable to not only their own faction and the local government, but to the Somnambulist Project of Gier as well. If successful, the Firestarters would gain valuable allies in their unending battle to protect and nourish Valenth's natural ecosystems.

They had *not*, however, expected an appearance from the Silent Rose in any capacity, let alone an *Iicarn sighting*.

The Iicarn were the scientific organization's trump card; a race of winged, genetically-engineered soldiers with incredible agility.
First seen ages ago, before the Firestarters and the Rose were official organizations, they were known for appearing out of thin air and laying waste to entire war parties before vanishing again without a trace.
They were employed in only the most vital of Silent Rose missions, and almost never outside of the Rose's own territories... which meant something significant, and *potentially dangerous*, was afoot.

A flash of shining gold burst onto the scene, landing heavily atop the soft, well-trodden dirt in the middle of the Firestarters' encampment; rangers and researchers paused to admire the beast as it stretched its serpentine neck and hissed, a frill of brilliant red feathers spreading atop its head.
Atop the golden dragon's powerful shoulder, a tiny owl blinked its round eyes with a hoot, pointedly eyeing the crowd as if to ask if it had done well.

"I'll deal with them," theFlarionannounced, tossing her head and whipping her plumed tail slowly about. She was young and sleek, clearly not far into young adulthood; her voice oozed with pride. "We'll see if I can't bring one back alive for questioning; it's high time we had a closer look at these things."

With that, she hurled herself into the air, winging up above the canopy and towards the city as the Firestarter scouts exchanged worrisome glances.

Book I Chapter 4: Skirmish

Gier, South Dreamsong

The suns had begun to set in the sky when the young Flarion arrived over Gier, her powerful wings holding her aloft as she made her way, eyes open wide to watch for suspicious movement.
She *felt* the things nearby, without a doubt. All of her kind were trained from birth to sense abnormal auras-- all the better to find and neutralize otherworldly threats and corruption.

She was just a bit out of her element here, however.

The great, fat zeppelins drifted slowly through the air, constantly blocking out one line of sight or another. She was willing to guarantee the Iicarn were hiding behind the infernal things, mocking her as she searched. The thought made her clench her teeth in anger before swooping over the busy city streets, desperate to pick up even one of the dreamkin before they caused some sort of trouble...
There! She spied a glittering white wing disappearing just behind a nearby factory.
With a determined and indignant squawk, she shot through the air like a bolt of fire after it. She was dimly aware of the sound of people below gasping and screaming at the sight of her, but she paid them little mind.
Mortals were so needlessly *excitable*; she would destroy the Iicarn, Gier would be safe, and they would thank her in the end.

With a powerful stroke of her wings, she rose higher into the air to meet the little darting Iicarn, easily twice its size, and bellowed a challenge. One breath of flame and the creature would be easily dispatched.
But as she roared and prepared to charge, the winged humanoid lifted its hand, quickening the air itself into a wicked-looking spear.
In an instant, dragon and Iicarn clashed, claws and spear slashing and parrying one another with supernatural speed.
Furious, the Flarion lunged forward to snap at the thing with her jaws, winning a mouthful of tiny, sharp crystal feathers for her trouble.
Spinning for a second strike, she realized thedreamkinhad vanished--

--only to have its alien weapon plunged into her throat from below.

Her scream faded into a whimper as she fell, driving head-first into the top of a zeppelin floating by just beneath her.
The Iicarn hovered, watching in grim silence as dragon and airship plummeted to the ground in a tangle.

I was just attacked by a Flarion whelp.
The threat has been neutralized, but there have been civilian casualties, it said to something listening in its mind.

Over the city proper? Came the reply, dripping with irritation.

Yes. It appeared out of nowhere and engaged me; I couldn't fly fast enough to lead it to the outskirts before the fighting began.

Evacuate, and lay low until I tell you to proceed with the mission. The others have been instructed to do the same.

Of course, my lord.

Quickly checking its wings for damage, the dreamkin bolted away as emergency teams rushed to pull wounded passengers from the zeppelin wreckage below.

Book I Chapter 5 : Friendly Fire

Vigilant Plaza
Gier, South Dreamsong

"Calm down, everyone. Please calm down-- the situation at hand is under control. I'm here to make a very important announcement."

Shouting voices bubbled up through the plaza, drowning out Kelan Flarion's even tone, even with the help of the platform's speaker system. Standing beside an enormous golden eagle and several Flarion honor guards, he watched helplessly as the crowd shouted various obscenities at him-- for the sudden influx of Firestarters fliers popping up throughout the city as well as for the tragic attack over the city the evening prior.

Kelan rubbed his temples with his fingertips, watching one of the fliers in question float across the stage; he stopped it with his armored boot, picking it up and folding it to tuck it away.
He hoped his faction's words didn't end up nothing but insignificant litter drifting along the streets of the great industrial city.

"First, I would like to apologize for last night's accident, and extend my sorrow and condolences to the families of the deceased." As several voices rose to shout him down, he wondered dimly if the people gathered there had any idea how *literally* he had felt their pain.
"We are working with Gier's government as we speak to ensure no further incidents arise involving the public zeppelin routes and emergency combat situations. That said, my people have made a startling discovery regarding the future of the planet, and we have reason to believe that the Fatis Mirajin and all derivatives thereof are a significant and immediate threat to all life. If you've read our fliers--"

"We don't care about the sodding fliers, just get out of our city! " came an angry shout, and the crowd exploded into agreement and rage.
"*Leave our technology alone!*"

"This is going *well*," Kelan sighed under his breath to the great eagle, who only tilted her head slightly. "Please. *Please*, everyone! We have extensive proof for our claims, and will be providing evidence to the Somnambulist Project and the Dremish Government in a few--"

The Chapter narrowly dodged a thrown rock; immediately, the dragons at his side snarled and spread their wings in a threat display, prompting frightened squeals and, finally, anxious silence from the onlookers.

"Throw another rock, I dare *you*," one of the Flarions hissed before Kelan patted its shoulder and ordered it to sit back down.
Someone in a sharp brown pinstripe suit ascended the steps to the podium.

"Citizens of Gier-- I am Elliot Christoph, founder of the Somnambulist Project," she said, raking her fingernails over her slicked-back platinum hair. "I understand many people have strong feelings about the Firestarters and their general messages. However, I have every reason to believe that these people are acting in the best interests of all of Valenth by trying to shed some light on the nature of miracrystal and mirajin energy.
We will be doing everything we can to learn about this relatively new source of power, as well as taking the steps necessary to make it safe for everyone to use-- both on a personal and a *global* level."

Kelan blinked slightly as the woman smiled warmly at him; so *this* was the legendary founder of the Project.
Many tales of Elliot and her almost mad passion for the sciences spread throughout Valenth, usually propagated by researchers and scientist who had had the honor of working with her or her prestigious organization.
She was friendly, even-tempered, and diligent in her work-- but also had a head for moral issues and neutrality, something the infamousSilent Rose Organizationsorely lacked.
He had *not* expected her to turn up for his presentation, as the woman tended to keep to her offices rather than making public appearances in any situation.

Sheepishly, he smiled at her in return, noting the crowd had setted considerably."There may be trying times ahead of us, but we are on your side, I promise. We'll do everything we can to come to resolutions that benefit as many people as possible. We don't think ill of technology or scientific advancement; we'd just like to ensure that any new devices or fuel sources are *safe* for the environment and the people living in it," he said, turning away to climb up onto the golden eagle's back as a handful of people applauded.
He had said all he could to sway the people watching tonight-- the rest would have to rely on evidence.

"Thank you, Miss Christoph," he sighed, reaching down to shake her hand. "They were going to eat me alive out there."

"You deserve better than that, Lord Flarion." She nodded, understanding. "People are upset and afraid right now, but things will improve. I look forward to working with you."

"I only hope my faction's reputation doesn't tarnish yours. We need more noble scholars like you around here," he said with a wistful smile before commanding his mount into the evening sky, the two Flarion dragons following close behind.

Despite herself, Elliot blushed faintly, turning to leave the stage as the Mayor made his way up to speak.

"What an unhappy occupation. Poor fellow," she sighed.

Book I Chapter 6 : Window Into Dreams

Vigilant Plaza
Gier, South Dreamsong

As the suns sank into the horizon and the people of Gier returned to their homes for the evening, a winged creature slipped out of the shadows to stand before thegreat clockwork dragonsculpture that sat proudly in the center of the city. Curious, the Iicarn gently traced its fingertips over the rough and rusted surface, its eyes wide behind its basilisk-faced mask.

One by one, others dropped out of the sky to land behind the first, forming a small crowd in the dark.
The Elder was the last to arrive, amber eyes glinting through his owl mask, folding his wings shut against his back before reaching up into the air a second time.
The other Iicarn followed suit, each grabbing something invisible but solid before pulling sharply in unison; the air rippled and bunched like a curtain before splitting open, miraplasm spewing out of the wound in space as though reality itself was bleeding.
As the miraplasm drizzled onto the pavement, it began to coagulate and solidify, forming tiny, sharp crystals where it fell.

Satisfied, the Elder gestured, and three Iicarn slipped through as the rest kept careful watch for passers-by.

Mission underway; the subject has been located. Retrieval in progress, the Elder said to the creature listening within its head.

Excellent. Make haste; you won't have long before someone notices and starts a ruckus, I'm certain.

Yes, milord.

The hole began to tremble and sway. Moments later, the three missing Iicarn swiftly leapt out, shuffling aside just as an enormous striped serpent squeezed its way out, sliding onto the rough ground with a deep hiss. Where its scales touched the earth, miraplasm formed, oozing out from under its belly and crystalizing as it slithered out into the night.
The beast was enormous, easily as long as the zeppelins drifting overhead, its body banded with iridescent stripes so brilliant they seemed to glow in the moonlight, its flat face decorated with a pair of sharp horns atop its nose. It tasted the air with its forked tongue briefly before heading purposefully towards the city gates.

Delighted, the Iicarn took wing, following close behind the giant viper.

As the otherworldly parade crossed into the the outskirts of Gier, anenormously fat*Aeneski* stood upon a nearby hill, gazing up at the night sky, his back turned towards them as the wind gently tossing his long crimson hair and the dreamshard-encrusted cloak atop his shoulders.

He did not turn, but they felt his eyes upon them, hungrily drinking in every detail.

"Welcome to Valenth, my friend. Beautiful, isn't it?"

Book I Chapter 7 : Stargazer

Gier, South Dreamsong

The viper lifted its flat head, tasting the air slowly as its companions waited. "Thank you-- I fear to think what may have become of me in that place," it sighed at last. "So this is the world of Matter..."

"A tiny portion of it, at any rate. We're outside of the city of Gier-- my favorite human city, really," Nefirian said with a faint smile.

"I'm fond of humans. They've got heart, and some of the most fascinating dreams I've ever lived."

The snake scrunched its nose. "All I can smell is smog and rust."

"Mmm, yes. They are *fiercely* successful in the world of science and engineering, which is dear to my heart. It comes naturally to them like magic to we fae. Er, or *most* fae. I'm no magician, despite what my village expected of me... But they pay for their talent with a bit of short-sightedness when it comes to long-term effects of their devices. And brief lives."

"Seems like a good way to keep them from causing too much damage," the viper hissed.

"Unfortunately, no. They breed like rabbits, and tend to pass legacies down so their children can continue their work," Nef laughed. "This city has existed for roughly two hundred years, and the lands around it and its sister up the road are already afflicted. Poor Kelanwill have his work cut out for him."

Milord, whispered one of the Iicarn through the mind-link they shared with the Dreamwaker.

"Yes?"

It pointed to a large bird flying in from over Gier, headed straight for them. *Here he comes.*

"...*well*, Achare, it would seem our conversation is being cut short," Nefirian sighed, ripping an aetherhole open before them with his sharp nails. "My servants will lead you to Laps-Lucienne; make yourself at home. I'll be by once I've been scolded soundly." The chubby Chapter grinned impishly.

The Iicarn crowded into the aetherhole, followed by the giant snake, who peered through from the other side. "Thank you again, dreamfather. I will be more cautious in the future," she hissed.

"You needn't thank me-- I'll have to look into exactly what we're dealing with. But for now, shoo, or I'll *really* be in for it," Nef laughed, scooping up a handful of the miraplasm dripping from the aetherhole and using it to seal the gash shut, shaking his hand clean just as the great golden eagle came to a landing before him.

"What manner of trickery are you up to tonight, Nefirian?" Kelan's voice was abrasive as he glowered down from atop the bird.

"I'm not certain what you mean," Nef murmured innocently, refusing to make eye contact.

But Kelan only narrowed his odd eyes. "Iicarn, *in Gier?* Opening portals into the dream and leaving miraplasm everywhere? This isn't like you at all, and it's making it rather difficult for me to overlook the fact that *one of your mutants killed a Flarion yesturday*." His tone softened. "Gods *damnit*, Nefirian. She was *still young*."

The red-haired faerie glanced down at his belly, absently wondering what his feet looked like. "I'm not sure what happened or why my Iicarn are so far from home, but I'm sorry for your loss. You know I wouldn't go out of my way to make trouble for you... *especially* with your... *affliction*."

Kelan pursed his lips; the freckle-faced bastard wasn't even trying to lie convincingly.

"You're making trouble for me *right now*. I had to go through Gier and burn away all of the miraplasm your pets left everywhere before someone blundered into it and mutated. I don't know what it is you're up to, but I'd appreciate it if you'd go back to playing doctor on *your own turf*. Leave these people out of it."

Nef finally glanced up.
Finding the eagle staring fiercely down at him, he crossed his eyes and stuck his tongue out at her while Kelan wasn't looking. "*Yes, sir*."

"Stop mocking me. I'm serious."

"When *aren't you?"*

Kelan grabbed the reins, and the eagle spread her wings, still scowling at the little Chapter. "I *can't deal with you right now*. Clean up your act. It's bad enough your Mirajin is causing trouble on its own."

As the Flamekeeper's mount took wing, Nefirian slipped his hands in his pockets and smirked, eyeing a nearby rock. "Oh, *Kelan*. You act like you know everything," he murmured as the rock began to float as if held by an invisible hand.

Book I Chapter 8 : Reverie I

The land was covered in a blanket of white as far as the eye could see; white petals fell from a blank, empty sky to settle upon the soft snow. And yet, Elliot Christoph was far from cold.
She stood in one of her best suits, perfectly straight and composed beside a great fountain, water trickling from its spout even in the winter weather. Quietly, she watched as a rose petal settled atop the palm of her hand.
She felt *his* eyes upon her, his breath warming her cheek.

She didn't move.

"Elliot..."

And he was there beside her, standing as straight and noble as she; his green eyes sparkling with just a *hint* of mischief, his hands folded neatly away within his pristine white suit.

His lips moved in time with her own, mouthing her words as she spoke them. "No, Nefirian."

The Dreamwaker grinned faintly at the response to his unspoken question; his arms were folded now, gently holding a white peacock against his breast. The bird dipped his head with a soft cluck, its long tail swishing against the snowy ground.

This was part of their nightly ritual, a greeting between friends. The reply never changed-- but for now, at least, it was inconsequential.

"Someday, you'll answer differently," theChaptermused.

"Perhaps," Elliot said softly, her tone even. "But then... how would you spend your evenings?"

Book I Chapter 9 : Early Warning

Outskirts of Gier, South Dreamsong

A tiny figure exploded from the deep forest, running as fast as her stumpy legs could carry her.
Dark legs skittered and scratched at the earth just behind, countless red eyes gleaming as they focused on potential prey.

The goblin knew better than to glance back. Teeth gritted, she pushed herself as hard as she could, managing an extra burst of speed that carried her out into a clearing and onto the cobbled road leading into the human city of Gier.
Her pursuers came to a stop, hesitating in the shadows before slowly returning the way they had come. The little green faerie dropped onto her knees to catch her breath, looking worriedly over her shoulder to ensure her relative safety.

"Not every day you see visitors from up north," drawled an *Aeneski* officer upon the back of a land drake, pulling the creature's reins back to keep it steady. "To what do we owe this dubious honor?"

The goblin glanced up and then away, pulling her hands up over her head before jibbering in panickedAengoch. "Not here because I want to be, *tallfae*. Cooped up in your machine-city, no idea what's going on around you."

"Yeah?" He rolled his eyes, gently stroking his mount's neck with a palm. The drake cocked its head, eyeing the goblin as if considering how it might taste. "How about you tell me all about it, then? I got nowhere to be, and all the *real* crime happens down in the dark district."
It was hardly his idea of entertainment, but anything would be better than standing watch by the road leading into the city at this time of evening; it was duty better suited to a skittish human, likely to pass the night jumping at every shadow the sparse trees and rusty lamp-posts threw.

Biting her lip, the goblin rose to her full height-- a meagre four feet, but impressive enough to her own kind. The *Aeneski* she stood before was unmoved.
"The *Ladies*," she breathed, her golden, slitted eyes going wide. "The Ladies move by the hundreds, coming up from far below to find prey. The earth shudders around them as they crawl. Drove us from our village... something forced them into our territory!" The little creature frowned. "They'll be here in yours, soon."

"...Ladies, huh?" The elf shook his head and sighed. "Ah, women-- surely a cause for alarm! I could report it to the station for you, but the constable would have my neck.
Listen, you're just as welcome here in Gier as any... *valid* citizen as long as you stay out of trouble, but I don't think you're gonna get very many people to hear you out with a nonsense tale like that.
Though I'm sure you'll interest more than a few people if you find the nearest bar, hah."

The little faerie glowered at him in silence for a moment, then turned to scurry down the road as the sky slowly darkened above.

"The *Deathly Ladies*, you lofty idiot," she growled to herself in her own tongue as she ran, tugging her cloak around her shoulders. She had known better to expect any sort of help in this city-- but she had little other choice.
Gier was the closest sizable settlement for miles around-- and the only one likely capable of preparing for the threat that had all but consumed her tiny village.

If only she could find a single citizen willing to take her seriously, of course.

"If no one listens to me and finds a way to deal with this, they'll learn the hard way what I meant. *Ugh!* Attempting to tell *tallfolk* anything is like pulling teeth," the goblin lamented. "Rotted, nasty teeth who think themselves royalty."

Book I Chapter 10 : Proper Representatives

Darkling Wood, South Dreamsong

Patches of light shone down through the trees, flashing brilliantly over the young Flarion's golden scales as he slipped through the brush, tongue scenting the air. This was the last place he wanted to be. Darkling Wood was reasonably well-kept and free from malaise and mirajin, but he had been sent here to scout for so-called 'possible disturbances', while the Limbo Peninsula to the east slowly crystallized.
Grumbling to himself, he scaled a tree, carefully grabbing hold of a thick limb in his hind legs as he stood to survey his surroundings. Cupping a talon over his eyes to shield the light of the two suns, he squinted into the distance, gazing out over the woodland.

"Why even bother with this?" he wondered aloud with a sharp lash of his tail. "If I fly back to camp and tell them the coast is clear--*?!*"
A prickly sensation tickled the back of the young dragon's throat, and a chill ran down his spine. Something was coming-- *and it was radiating mirajin!*
He took to the wing with an unhappy hiss, watching with growing concern as a small fissure tore open in a nearby meadow, a pair of enormous, crystalline claws reaching up into the light.
The Boralion crawled into the soft grass and yawned loudly as it blinked its tiny yellow eyes.

"It's no wonder I was stationed here," the golden dragon announced with an air of authority as it swooped in to land beside the newcomer with a scowl. "I suppose it was because of all of the suspicious Silent Rose activity in the area, then."

The burly violet dragon eyed him with disinterest. "Oh, one of you. What're you on about, then?" Snapping its tiny, shimmering wings in against its sides, it trundled past, nonchalantly shoving several saplings clear out of the ground as it made its way into the woods.

"I was clearly sent here to watch for *you!* And now that you're here..." the Flarion frowned. What *would* he do, now that the other dragon was here? "...now that you're here, *you should stop at once!*"

The Boralion paused, lifting its head to eye him with confusion. "I should stop *what?* I'm looking for something. Could you go and be noisy at someone else? It's rather important."

"Incidentally, I *can't do that*. I'm going to stay here and make certain you don't get up to anything unwholesome," he announced.

"Suit yourself, then."
With a casual shrug, the purple dragon pushed its way deeper into the trees. The Flarion followed close behind, swooping from branch to branch to watch the other beast with a great deal of suspicion.

"...so, what *are* we doing?" the Flarion asked at last, despite its better judgement.

The other dragon ignored him, instead barreling through several trees before stopping within a clearing marked with a tiny wooden shed.
"...aha!" Pleased with itself, the creature promptly tore into the earth with its molelike claws, revealing a mining tunnel.

"I--what?! Stop that! What if that's public proper--what if that's *private property?!* You Roses are never up to any good!" the Flarion cried in horror.

Much to his astonishment, the Boralion stopped digging immediately, shuffling backwards with a deep snort.

"Someone's going to have to fix this now. Why would you even--" A large claw clapped around the golden dragon's beak, gently turning his head towards the enormous spider-*thing* crawling from the tunnel.

Tall and sleek and covered from head to toe in thick black fur, it had a round head covered in shiny red eyes, and an unusually long, almost humanoid torso. A pair of arms-- complete with five-fingered hands-- reached outwards from the base of the body, just before the legs.

The Flarion swore from behind the Boralion's claws before it let him go. "*What in the name of the Flamekeeper is THAT THING?!*"

"Finally, you start to ask relevant questions," the violet dragon sniffed.

Silent, the spider watched them carefully for a few moments, then eyed the mounds of upset dirt with narrow-eyed disapproval. Folding its arms across the base of its torso, it suddenly convulsed and doubled over, seeming to melt away before the two dragons' eyes.
Black fur sloughed away as its body twisted and reshaped, limbs merging and bending, forming thick, muscular legs and powerful wings. Its torso shortened and curled back as its head elongated, sweeping forward into a short snout, and its eight eyes combined into two.

Her transformation complete, the Erosion Courtesan gazed back at them with scorn, folding her wings carefully in against her sides.

"And just what are the two of you doing out here-- *together*, no less?" she demanded.

Book II Prologue

The Cathedral of a Thousand Roses
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Flap. Flap. Flap.

The silence of dawn was broken by the steady flap of giant wings, a sound the citizens of Laps-du-Ment had grown accustomed to in the past few days.

Yet, the sight of golden fire, burning in the light of the rising suns, was one that was greeted by immediate disbelief and terror by those who bothered going to their windows to see the commotion.

Impossible. A Flarion-- in Chimre?

In Laps*?*

What few noticed, however, was the tiny forest atop the great beast's back, or its exact dimensions-- while the light gave the metallic sheen of its scales away, it flew well above the city before finally swooping down like a hawk before the Cathedral itself, melting away into a tiny elf, clad in animal skins and a few stray leaves.

The master of the castle had noticed, of course, as an old scientist might be expected to.
After countless years of interaction, one learned the subtle differences in the sounds of certain types of dragon's wing. An Erosion had a light flutter, not unlike that of an overlarge bat; a Boralion's proportionately tiny wings beat furiously with a dull hum, rather like a fat, purple hummingbird or bumblebee.

Those were the sorts of dragons that had any business flying around Nefirian's city, and *neither of those* were what he had heard.

Certain a declaration of war was being flown in on shining wings, the doctor flung open the doors of his Cathedral-- only to find himself face to face with *Prince Valdren himself*, as rumpled and wild as he'd ever looked.

Being the sort of man who lived as often in fantasy as reality, Dr. Dreamscar wasn't entirely certain he had awakened just yet.
Blinking his eyes with great care, he rubbed them once each for good measure.

It certainly didn't help that Valdren *didn't* appear to wish to slay him where he stood.

"Nefirian," *he said softly*. "There's a lot on my mind, and I was hoping we could... *talk*."

Book II: Chapter 1 - An Evening Well Spent...

The Cathedral of a Thousand Roses
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Nefirian held his husband's hand shamelessly as they made their way through the gates and the front gardens, his spring jacket wrapped snugly around him to protect against the crisp chill of the coming night. "I don't believe I've ever seen dancing quite as riveting as that. Do you suppose it's really Luxi?"

He returned the squeeze, gently navigating Nef away from the front doors and instead around the side of the house. "As if I'd take you to see a fake. Next time, I'll just take you to see Glass Marionette jumping around in skirts. You wouldn't know the difference," he sniffed with his nose in the air, feigning snobbery.

Nefirian perked his ears in mild surprise, but not before laughing softly at the thought. "Oh, the silver-tongued god has made an appearance tonight, I see. So where's this we're headed? It's a bit late for me to prune the roses..."

Bastion lead him around to the back gardens, and the neat little porch by the house.
Usually, at this time of night, most of it would be swathed in darkness, lit only by the few lanterns at the door.... but tonight, the gardens were alive with tiny, twinkling lights, and a simple little table and chairs sit waiting for them, as does a bottle of wine, and a platter of.... something savory.

"The perfect end to a perfect evening? And you say I'm too lazy to be romantic."

Nef looked around at it all, wide-eyed with surprise and appreciation."... Oh, Bast. You shouldn't have-- what's the occasion?" he breathed, flitting over for a closer look and leaning in to appraise the bottle of wine before the pair of them sat. "...*damn*. I.... I dont know what to say. This is just too much!"

The little scientist leaned forward to pour the wine and induldge for a while in the soft, dancing light before allowing his gaze to land on Bast. Tentatively, he rubbed a fingertip around the rim of his glass after a sip, eager for something to keep his thoughts steady in the sudden silence that passed between them. Bast was avoiding eye contact, his eye flitting from decoration to decoration instead.

"...so, really. Dinner, the shows, this...this lovely little scene. What is it all for? You're holding something in."

"...I'm going away for a little bit. Not long... maybe a month or so."

"...away? " Nef cocked his head, his ears falling back a bit. "But where? Why? You come and go as you please already. Is this...business?"

"No, not.... not really." Bastion sighed faintly, leaning back in his chair and unceremoniously downing the rest of his wine in one large gulp. "...He's alive, Nef. I have to go back. I have to see him again."

Nefirian paused, clutching his wineglass and nodding ever so slightly.
Of course-- he should've known as much, the moment he... well, he hadn't really been in much condition to think about a lot, then, after all.

"...of course. I wouldn't keep you from him for anything. In fact, I really sh--..."
The words died on Nef's lips, and he shook his head, looking away in shame with just a hint of poorly-suppressed reluctance.

"...Nef?" He frowned, ears drooping a little, too. "...You're not jealous, are you?"

"*Jealous?* No, of course not. Just... well. You go, and get yourself sorted out with him," he said slowly. "I've got my own unfinished business to tend to, but I don't think I'm ready for that yet. I'll stay here and tend to things, and... make plans."

"...Are you sure you don't want me around for that?"

"Plans, my darling prrb. *Plans*, not action. Not yet. I have a hell of an excuse to begin fabricating about my little philosopher's stone...but we're not here to worry and fret, are we?" He murmured, pouring a new glass of wine for each of them. "I'll miss you, dummy...but I'll know you're in good... hands."

"...You could throw a bit of a tantrum, at least."

"That'd be wasting time while you're still here, don't you think?" Nef smiled, soft and slow with just a hint of melancholy.

Bastion reached across the table for Nef's hand, rubbing it gently with his thumb. "You should come out later, and see him too. He likes you."

He took Bast's hand in return. "You get things worked out, the two of you... and I'll see if I can't sneak back long enough to."

"Try not to miss me too much. I know it'll be hard, and you'll want to do reckless things to recreate the experience... but I'd really prefer you waited to mess around with a silisk until after I get home, kay?" He grinned, leaning in to offer Nef a morsel of cheese which he accepted gratefully, peering up at the blonde with mischief dancing in his eyes.

"And leave you out? *I wouldn't dream of it.*"

Book II Chapter 2: Dreamsong Gazette - 5/18

North Dreamsong is well-known for its flourishing woods and rocky mountain ranges; many Dremish people travel there during the warmer months to partake of its pristine splendor well away from the smoggy hustle and bustle of city life in the modern day.

However, most tourists know little of the area's ever-watchful guardians-- the gargoyles. Born of solid rock where earth meets sky, the creatures are content to sit still and observe in silence as their world literally takes bloom around them.
Image

Typically shy, silent, and peaceful, North Dreamsong's visitors this year have noticed the creatures wandering the countryside, keeping their distance despite an obvious, uncharacteristic curiosity.

A few specimens have been seen with strange tendrils of energy seeping from cracks in their earthy hides, though no one has yet dared to try for a closer look.

Silisk shaman living in the area urge tourists to stay well away from the gargoyles.
"Keep your distance, and don't do nothin' stupid," one elder said. "Tensions're high in the spirit realm lately. Whispers of earth and air plannin' something... I wouldn't get involved, and gettin' close is gettin' involved."

Asked for more of her thoughts on the situation, she continued, "Gargoyles're elementals, y'know. They don't do nothin' to hurt anybody unless somethin's up, usually y'won't even see 'em unless you travel deep in the mountain paths. Now they're comin' up real close, an' some of 'em don't feel right anymore. You see one, you get the hell outta the way, y'hear?"

Surprisingly, the Firestarters have not been seen in the area at all, leaving some wondering if the current situation with the rocky beasts is a mere natural anomaly.

Book II Chapter 3: A Land Where Time Stands Still...

Three weeks ago
Aensdoun

The great bear was flopped onto one side to relax, the sunlight filtering through the canopy above and dancing across his dark fur. Twitching an ear slightly, he rolled to lay upon his back and bask in silence, listening to the soft whisper of grass crunching under tiny elven feet. His chest rose and fell with each breath, his nose lifted just enough to catch the approaching creature's scent.

Beyond that, he did not move; it was unnecessary.

"...you have come back, after all." His voice rumbled like thunder on the horizon.

Nervous, Bastion addressed Sasha's back, ears drooping slightly. "I'd long thought you dead. If I had known..."

"Do not blame yourself for what you had no knowledge of, Honey-hair. I was good as dead for some time."

He glanced downward at the forest floor, still unsettled. "I left you for so long."

"Better for you to have gone, than for Wolf to have snapped you up with so many of the others. You are back home again. The Den will be overjoyed."

"...You're not disappointed? I've let you down."

"*I* will be the one to decide that. " The massive bear finally rolled to his feet, casting a great shadow over Bast as he gazed down upon him. "You are home. You do not understand significance of this."

Bastion gazed up, unable to disguise the yearning in his face-- desperate to earn Sasha's approval, to make up for so much lost time...

"Honey-hair, Wolf is *dead*. He troubles us no longer, his children went mad and fled. His games and deceit are done, and these groves are quiet. You can feel regret for not dying in last battle, or you can accept that what has come to pass has come to pass, and we are in present *now*. *You* are here now, and *I* am here now." He thumped a forepaw against the soft earth for emphasis, eyes never leaving Bastion's face.

"...What *happened*, since the last time I saw you?"

"Wolf declared open war against the Den, sent his *dog-men* after us and led me into a trap. Nearly succeeded." Sasha shook his head, sitting down with a grumble. "He still wanted the wood for his own. Always. Well, we put end to *that*."

"Of course you did," Bastion whispered. "He could never defeat you, my lord." Feeling brave, he took a step closer, clearly wishing to seek comfort in the massive bear's company.

"Come. Walk with me, tell me what you have seen. Now, we talk-- tonight, we hunt and feast." The bear leaned his head down to give Bast a coaxing bump forward with his snout, as much a nudge as an affectionate gesture.

He blinked, moving to stand by Sasha's shoulder with a hand in his fur. "...You would be disappointed, I think. We are divided, as we've never been before."

Sasha rumbled low, beginning to head slowly off across the clearing alongside Bast. "...divided. How can such a thing be?"

"Nefirian and Kelan... they don't agree on *anything*. They never did, but now it's... it's a lot worse than it used to be."

He snorted loudly. "How can be worse? They fought like mates. Three of you... like three of us. What is happening?"

"They.... they think very differently. And they both think the other is wrong."

"What could be so important, to tear *them* apart?" He stopped walking to stare quizzically at the little elf. Bastion stopped as well, looking sadly up at him.

"...Nefirian has... access to power he doesn't fully understand. He wouldn't use it to hurt anyone, but Kelan thinks..." He frowned, thinking of how to word it in a way the bear would understand. "...Kelan thinks it might hurt people anyway, whether Nef wants it to or not."

Sasha fell silent for a long while-- almost as if he'd forgotten he was speaking to Bastion at all, though his gaze never left him.
He stroked his fingers gently through the bear's fur, concern furrowing his brow slightly. Sometimes it just took a while for Sasha to think about things.
"Mmm... I had noticed a change in you. This is that same power?"

"...I've changed? How?"

"Your aura hums at a different frequency," he rumbled. "It is not unlike things I have seen before... not *completely*."

"What does that mean, though? My *aura*?"

"All living things have *aura*. It is... the energy that flows through. Something significant has touched you, and you have not been the same since that. Mm... in a very long time. What is *this*, Honey-hair?" The bear gazed at him again, his eyes weary. What had happened to his Speaker?

Bastion paled, his ears drooping again. *Had it really been so long?*
"...Nef made something. I don't know *how*, but he did, and it's... it's like a stone. If you're close to it, it can change things. Sometimes because you mean for them to, sometimes... they just... *happen*."

The bear's eyes widened; with a grunt, he stood, shaking his fur. "...Dilndrou must know of this. He will know what to do. *Come*, Honey-hair!"

Reaching for Bast with a paw, he placed the elf atop his head before making his way out of the grove and deeper into the wood.
Bast groaned quietly, hiding his head between the bear's ears. "...I knew you'd say that. He's not going to like it."

"I will take brunt of his irritation, do not worry. Still, must be done; he has been fussing over the Winds for a long time now. This will answer his questions."

Sasha tromped along, his pace slowing as solid earth gave way to the soft mud of the marshes. Grumbling a bit as his paws began to sink in, he continued onward into the dark, dank swamplands with Bastion atop his head.

Book II Chapter 4: Up in Flames

Four weeks ago
Aqk's Peak
Einstall, Schalle

"You've been quiet," Kelan observed as Valdren perched on the edge of the great mountain, his head hung and eyes shut.

The Prince didn't respond.

"Come on... don't tell me you're still so upset about what happened. Everyone explained--"

"...why did you take me away from her when you did, *Kelan*?"

Kelan's face screwed up in shock. "...what *did you just call me*?" he gasped breathlessly.

"I've had enough of this. I've... I've had enough of... I've had enough of *YOU!*" The golden dragon whipped himself around, eyes burning white-hot with rage.

"All my life, Kelan. All my *life*, I've struggled to meet your standards, to realize your dreams in the hopes that I could be the perfect son I thought you deserved," Valdren growled. "All this time, I've taken my frustration and anger out on Nefirian and his ilk, denouncing them for throwing away so many lives so callously. But just now, I've realized my grave error."

Eyes wide, Kelan began to step closer to the raging beast. "*Valdren*, I--"

"*NO!*" the Prince snapped, arching his neck. "You started this mess. You started it the day you decided my own mother was too dangerous for me to be around, and stole me away from her as a whelp. A fucking *whelp*! You thought you could make up for that empty space all by yourself, but you've failed. Nothing I ever do pleases you. Nothing I ever say is enough to win the love I've scratched and clawed for since this stupid, futile dance began.
"Bastion and Marquise-- one the shameless mate of the one you've blamed everything on, the other his daughter, both of whom who have had more *exposure* to that accursed rock--" he spat, "than me, *thanks to your timely intervention, might I add,* not only care a hell of a lot more about me than you ever have, but they also have the good graces to admit that they've been affected by the damn thing!
You? You're a *Chapter*, Kelan. You got the same dosage of that shit that Bast and Nef did, and you claim to the whole damn world that you're the pure one and you'll save everybody. *Hypocrite*. Do you really believe the bunk you spout? To me, to the other Firestarters? Not only that we are somehow different from the others, but that we alone can save the world from a fate worse than death? By doing something that *you, yourself,* are afraid of seeing through to fruition?!"

The chapter sank to his knees, utterly silent. How could he even begin to respond? He knew he'd made a grave mistake in seperating his son and mother, but...
"I did what I thought was best for you then, Valdren. I know now that I was wrong. I never meant to raise you as a tool for my own ambitions. Do you truly believe I left you no other choice, that I wouldn'tve been thrilled to help you pursue any... anything your heart *desired*?" His throat was raw, his lips dry.

He'd had fights with Valdren in the past, of course, but never anything of this magnitude. Kelan wore his fear and sorrow on his sleeve-- and yet...

"What was it you've said before, *father*?" Valdren narrowed his eyes. "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, something like that? Well... even Nefirian and his band of glorified crooks know how to take care of their own."
He spread his wings, blocking out the light of the moon with them. "It's time I sought out my own path; I've had quite enough of *yours*. *Goodbye*, Kelan."

Before the astonished, heartbroken elf could utter another syllable, the Flarion Prince was gone, soaring out into the night air without hesitation or so much as a final glance back at Aqk's Peak.

"Oh, *Valdren*," Kelan whispered, his eyes misting over. "I truly *have* failed you."

Book II Chapter 5: Fine Dining

Three weeks ago
The Adephagius
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Nefirian made his way to the front door of the restaurant, straightening his monocle and hair as he went, slipping carefuly past waiters and wandering diners to greet his guest.
He was hoping he'd make an appearance soon, though he was certain he knew how discussions tonight would go, at least in part.

Selarion was waiting at the door, talking to a distinguished, elderly couple waiting for their table. It was odd that he'd been asked to wait, though he suspected it had something to do with Nefirian actually being present this evening, according to the doorman.

Nefirian spotted Selarion and couldn't help but smile a bit before making his way over to greet him, though he was more than happy to allow him to finish his conversation.

"Selarion-- lovely to see you again."

Selarion politely excused himself as the couple moved off to be seated, offering Nef a slight bow. "And you, Nefirian. You asked me to wait? Careful now, lest your other guests get jealous."

Nef chuckled softly, ushering Selarion off to the door in the back of the restaurant after offering a respectful bow in return. "Surely, they wouldn't deny a man quality time with a friend."

He paused for a moment to tap a combination into a little bronze dialing pad attached to the door, stepping aside to present the open door with a flourish."Come, let's catch up on things, shall we?"

Selarion didn't seem surprised at being lead away like this, stepping inside the room behind the open door. "It's been a while, hasn't it? I confess, I've been busy."

"Oh, it's no matter-- we all have, I believe. Bastion's taken off for Aensdoun, and I--... *well*."

Nefirian led Selarion down a long, narrow hallway and a small staircase, ignoring the sounds of surgical drills and hushed voices in conversation below as they passed through a second coded door and into the lavish dining room within. A woman began to shout just as Nef closed the door behind them, cutting off the sound.

"... I'm certain you must know about Valdren."

Selarion paused before he answered, as if to make sure he wasn't about to be interrupted by another shriek. "Yes, I'd heard. I imagine he was something of a surprise on your doorstep."

"Just a bit. He... well, I don't know exactly what happened, but it frightens me to think what could inspire him to visit *me*, of all people. Opus's presence, I'm sure, but... to come here. *Here*, with such a look in his eyes."

He shook his head, pulling out a chair for Selarion before seating himself and pressing a small button on the table, leaning toward a metal speaker-grate against the wall. "We've a guest-- kindly bring wine and appetizers, please."

Selarion was apparently unconcerned at sitting down to eat in an underground facility, rather than in the dining room upstairs. "Well, he's

never had a chance to see her before, has he? I suppose it's only natural that he might want to now."

"Of course. But I'd thought he'd never willingly set foot in Chimre unless it was to raze it to the ground as they did Grenadienne, not with the way Kelan had raised him." Nefirian frowned slightly, biting his lip for a moment and pushing old, painful memories back into quiet. "It's no matter, I suppose. The boy's clearly hurting, and I don't have the heart to turn him away from a safe haven. It all unsettles me somewhat."

The doctor glanced upward as a white leupak with a sash tied around its waist entered, carrying a tray of fine wine, glasses, and tiny pieces of glazed, roasted meats on skewers. It sat everything down before them, flashing Selarion a brief, friendly smile before bowing humbly and turning to go.

Selarion smiled graciously at the leupak before gazing admiringly at the delights Nefirian had arranged for him. "Naturally. His departure greatly unsettled Kelan... the Firestarters, last I heard, are at a loss as to what to do now. ...Have you spoken much, since he arrived?"

The Chapter shook his head lightly."When he first arrived, he explained that he and Kelan had... had a *disagreement*, and he wanted to see Opus if I'd allow it. Since then, he's been by her side," he said, looking up at Selarion.
"You understand why all this troubles me so much, I'm sure. He's been, by far, the loudest voice against theMirajin and everything it is and does since he first became a Firestarter. And now... he *rests beside it!* I'm ashamed to confess that initially I wondered if it wasn't a ruse so that he might get close enough to destroy it. But no, he has eyes only for his mother, the poor thing."

Selarion frowned, shaking his head. "You may be taking a great risk there, Nefirian, as innocent as his intentions might be. Kelan removed him to prevent any 'tainting' from contact with the mirajin... such sudden, direct contact may not be wise."

"I know," Nef admitted softly. "Believe me, I know... but he *needs* her right now, and I'm sure he considered that before he made his way here. I'll see that he's unharmed, to the best of my abilities."

Selarion nodded, though he didn't look entirely at ease with the situation. "Keep an eye on him."

"I will. Now... what of the Somnambulists? I've been caught up in so much of my own business that I haven't had a chance to keep tabs on them."

"Ah, I'm sure you've heard about Miss Elliot's situation?"

" ...situation?" Nef sat bolt upright, his ears laying back. "No, what's happened to her? *Is she alright?*"

Selarion blinked, evidently surprised by this. "It's been public gossip for a while now. Her brother?"

"I've been under a figurative rock for the past few weeks-- hell, I didn't even know she *had* a brother... Go on."

Selarion sighed, looking down at the table as if he'd rather be doing anything else than gossiping about this. "...The short version is that her brother is now a large, reptilian beast. You might be familiar with them. I believe one just served me dinner."

Nefirian stared at him without a word, the color draining from his face. "You--... *the attacks. No...*"

Selarion nodded, sipping at his wine."Mmhmm. She's been at his side, doing what she can."

Nef pressed his hand to his face, saying nothing for a long while.
He hadn't visited her since his world began crashing down around his ears; no doubt she'd already suspected he was to blame for that, and his absense had probably done nothing to help his case.
Not that he could dare show up again *now*...

He let his hand slide down to rest on the table again, absolutely crestfallen. "Too much has gone on in the past weeks. I've never felt so... so *helpless*."

"You can't be everywhere at once, Nefirian. She's coping, as well as only Miss Elliot can. I haven't been able to visit her in person, I thought it might be... well, inappropriate. I did send my regards, however. So did *you*." He offered a faint smile before taking another sip of his wine. "I knew you were busy, though I had expected you'd hear about it before now."

Nef considered this for a moment, raising a brow; Selarion's resourcefulness really shouldn'tve surprised him anymore, and *yet*... "*Thank you*, Selarion. I've actually heard precious little that hasn't come from the mouths of myRosesas of late, between trying to uncover exactly what happened withthe Reverie and ensuring the young Prince is taken care of. I fear we-- we meaning *Valenthians as a whole*-- are not nearly as alone on this planet as even my people once believed. "

"You're refering to the events around the blackout, yes? Now, I believe it's your turn to fill me in. I know little more than those of us left behind - only that Opus awakened, and shortly afterwards, we could sleep once more."

He nodded slightly, finally pouring himself a generous glass of wine before downing it in a few greedy gulps."What we just experienced these past few weeks was the reawakening of an *Elemental Lord."*

"...I see." Selarion seemed remarkably calm, nibbling on his dinner thoughtfully."I don't believe I'm familiar with any. "

" I never knew such a thing existed. Yes, my tribe had contact with what we termed *beast-gods*, but we believed they were it; just, natural spirits that roamed the land. This... thing was unlike any power I've ever witnessed; it not only threw me and my ilk clear out of Reverie, but it prevented everyone else from sleeping in the crossfire, and you know what? *I don't know how*. All I know is that I'm not on the same level, and it *will* return at some point. It was only by the appearance of Bastion's master that I lived to tell of it."

Selarion took a long moment to think before speaking again. "...I was under the impression that Bastion's master had passed on. So this lord ranks above them?"

"We had all believed so-- and yes, or so it seemed, though Sasha managed to banish it somehow. I didn't see or comprehend terribly much by that point, admittedly... but before it had decided it wanted me dead, it was focused on Opus... and it called her an *Elysian*. Not a term I've ever heard before."

"Elysian... no, not a word I'm familiar with either. Did it make any sense to her?"

"No, she didn't understand. He said it... almost as if it were her *species*. And for that matter, the area we were in was full of stone tablets and draconic idols. It may be the key to learning more about her; the Anshe were never prone to approaching anything that seemed as though it was the property of the gods, so it's likely nothing's been touched if there are more sites such as that."

"A site worthy of study, then. I expect you'll be fighting the Court off with a stick to get at it now."

"I've a gut feeling I'll be returning to Aensdoun soon enough... so it should prove an interesting endeavor no matter how I slice it."

Nefirian grinned cheekily, a bit of mischief shining through again as the shock of earlier news finally faded away. "I'll be more than happy to share anything interesting I might discover with the Somnambulists, in a show of good faith, of course."

"But of course. This is troubling, indeed."Selarion paused, clearly taking a moment to carefully word his thoughts. "...Now would be an excellent time for the three of you to put aside your differences, and work together."

Nef closed his eyes, nodding once. "Marquise would agree, I'm certain. But... I'm not sure how to approach Kelan right now."He glanced downward meekly, his ears drooping.

Surely, he couldn't proposition his old friend at a time like this.

"...If you were willing, I could pass on an invitation to Kelan." Selarion knew he had to tread carefully here - there was a lot of history between the three Chapters, and previous meetings had been... *explosive*, to put it mildly.

"Please? I... I feel we could all benefit from this, if he was willing. With something so big on the horizon, it'd be wise to educate ourselves and prepare."

"I'll pass it on. I... can't promise anything. He hasn't been easy to reach for a little while, now."

"Of course. Thank you, for whatever you *can* do, Selarion."

Book II Chapter 6: The Calm

Vales-Temps, Chimre

The rain came down in great sheets, seeming to cover the world in shimmering iridescence; crystal-encrusted trees sparkled in the soft light from glowing patches of fungi huddled against their roots.

Valdren held his wings over his head to keep the rain from his eyes. His head was dipped low to the ground, talons cupping a tiny flower as he examined it. Chimre was teeming with mirajin, indeed-- though it wasn't quite as the stories told.
The rain was strange and oil-like with rainbow hues that swirled and danced within each drop, and the plants all had their own ethereal, dreamlike beauty; it was all he could do not to wander forever, gazing in wonder at the strange ecosystem taking shape around him.

He had come here for an escape. No one would ever dream he'd seek shelter in Chimre, or at least, no one would consider the thought for long, which suited him.
Unfortunately, the primary reason for his visit-- Opus-- had been blissfully asleep, and no amount of coaxing had roused her.

He had remained by her side for days, regardless. Perhaps, somehow, she had known he was there.
Finally, Nefirian had insisted he go. He was concerned about Valdren's close contact with the Mirajin after so many years of avoidance. Kelan had taught him how to deflect the energy, but he decided to heed the little man's warning after all.
Now, he was wandering the untamed areas of Chimre, quietly exploring the country his father and peers had feared and loathed for millenia.
Vales-Temps was a beautiful forest despite the Mirajin's obvious influence, and he had yet to stumble upon any mutants of any sort.

Perhaps the forest creatures were as afraid of him as his kind was of them.

"I don't know what to believe anymore," he said to the little flower, stroking it gently with a knuckle. "How can we cleanse other creatures with the very same corruption in our hearts?"

Lifting his head, he gazed solemnly at his surroundings, raising a scaly brow momentarily as a sleek, white object resemblant of a massive lion's tail flicked away behind the trees.

"What does it *truly mean* to be taken by the Mirajin?"

Book II Chapter 7: Secrets of the Old Marsh

Aensdoun

Bastion rode upon the head of the great god-bear, his tone pleading. "...do we *have to? Right now*? ...It's selfish of me, Sasha, but I want to spend more time with you. *Just you*. You know what Dilndrou is like..."

The bear stopped for a moment, standing in the shallow waters and letting his eyes adjust to the fading light. His tone was gruff.
"Is time for leisure, and time for business. We do not see to this matter, and may not be time for *anything* anymore. Have you forgotten after so long? Unpleasant work is necessary to earn honey."

Bast sighed, flumping down on Sasha's back and gently playing with the fur around his ears. "Yah, and Dil's a massive wasp..."

Sasha's brow furrowed in confusion. "*Eh?* Is not wasp." What a strange thing to say!

Bastion groaned. Sasha sighed softly in exchange, as if less than thrilled himself-- then waded deeper into the mud, blinking as the canopy above began to block out almost all light.
"We stay no longer than necessary. You must remember teachings if you will stay with me, Honey-hair. Things have *not* changed."

Bastion sighed, but didn't argue any longer, resigning to burying himself in the bear's fur. Sasha climbed out of the murky water, sitting down on a patch of soft mud and pressing one paw in before bellowing into the dark, his rumbling voice echoing off of the thick trees and sending countless birds shooting off into the sky in terror.

"DILNDROU. STOP WITH YOUR FAFFING ABOUT AND COME UP!"

He waited patiently then, eyeing the water as it began to bubble and slosh a bit, softly at first and growing in intensity as the moments passed. Great wafts of swamp gas spewed into the air as the muddy soup churned, a deep rumble seeming to shake the very core of the earth as a massive, dark shape rose from the depths like a mountain of mud and waterlogged vegetation.

The shape towered before them, dripping with goo, before collapsing suddenly into the water with a splash as it flattened out, two watery blue eyes glowering out of the gunk.

The enormous alligator hissed softly, eyeing the pair with mild disdain.
"What is it, Sasha? I was studying the uses of leech ichor in medicine. This had *better* be worth my time..."
Bast wrinkled his nose as the great alligator displaced the muck of the swamp, sending up foul-smelling fumes as he settled down again. He kept his mouth shut, not wishing to draw Dil's attention before he had to.

Unfortunately, Dilndrou was already looking him over with great interest, almost as if he was reading something scrawled over Bast's skin.

He opened his jaws just a bit, his eyes darting over the tiny elf.

Sasha rumbled."Not in mood today, Dilndrou. Honey-hair is here--"

"I see that," Dilndrou drawled."*Lovely to see you again, Bastion*, by the by. Do you know anything about this energy you seem to be teeming with all of a sudden? It's been quite a subject of curiosity for me as of late..."

"It is about that. Yours is responsible, he says. It is a stone." Sasha frowned.

"My *what?* Come now, you can do better than-- a... a stone?" The old gator's eyes went wide. "Surely, you *can't mean..."*

Bastion looked a bit defensive, sitting up on Sasha's head and glaring at the beast. "Nef made something - you know how he is."

The creature sat bolt upright, rolling onto his side and leaning against a tree in a bizarre, unnatural mockery of a human gesture.
The threat was gone from him at once, replaced with a sense of overwhelming curiosity, his eyes glittering with a hunger that had little to do with his great maw.

"Oh, *quite*-- all too well. But no, this is terribly significant. The last thing I taught him to create before you all vanished... do you recall what it was?"

"We didn't vanish... and no, I don't. Do you even know how long it's *been?*"

"It *has* been a long time, I am aware of that much," The alligator-god admitted. "The seasons have cycled many, many times since our last meeting. The seasons have gone, my *children* have gone...."

He fell silent for a moment, brooding and glancing downward at the water, the nagging questions temporarily quieted by sudden melancholy.

Bastion seemed genuinely curious now, leaning down to look at Sasha. "Do you know?"

But the bear shook his head slowly. "We do not pay so much attention to passing of time. It is... trivial."

"Yes, well," Dilndrou interrupted, "It is a device we alchemists refer to as a Philosopher's Stone. They are alchemical crystals that purify and alter substances they are exposed to, allowing transformations into *greater things*."

He leaned forward, eyes locked upon the tiny elf before him. "Tell me, Bastion... *did Nefirian ever create his Stone?"*

"Oh, right. No, no, he didn't - he *tried to*, and it didn't work, but he... I think he realised he could do something else with it, or something."

Dilndrou raised a scaly brow. "...something *else?"*

"That's how he ended up with the Mirajin - I don't think he quite *meant* for that to happen either, but that's what happened."

"So this... this Mirajin is the result of his attempt at a Philosopher's Stone?" Dilndrou looked slightly wounded, drawing his tail in a bit. "That *bastard.* He stumbled upon something new, and he couldn't even be troubled to come back and show ME, after all I'd taught him? And I thought he was *different from the accursed silisks!"* His voice faltered a bit; the beast sounded suspiciously as though it was ready to cry.

Bast flattened his ears at the gator's remark, unintentionally tugging on Sasha's fur. "Probably because he thought you'd take it from him!"

Dilndrou scoffed, reigning himself in a bit after a moment of distress. "I'd do no such thing, and he knows it! He was my pupil, not my slave. I would love to have a look at it, and perhaps learn about it, but... a man's work is his own, though we all might learn and become the better from it. That aside, though... this energy has become as much a part of you as the bones in your body, and it's very much the same energy I have caught scent of drifting from distant shores."

Bastion sniffed. "Well, he obviously thought differently."

"You're being evasive," Dilndrou said icily. "Why has it affected you in this way? What of the others?"

"It... hasn't affected me much at all. Not compared to Nef and Kelan."

"I do not know by what you are comparing, but it has done more to you than you think; that much, I can *taste* on you."

Bastion looked mildly uncomfortable. "I've never *felt* any different... It's obvious in the others."

"What has it done to them?" The alligator asked softly.

"Nef can... he can control dream magic. Or he *could*, until that dream beast kicked him out of it - the one Sasha sent away. Kelan can feel life forces... I think, like it's all mapped out, when we're dying... he can feel it. I think."

"That stone did this? *Fascinating*. Mm... and yet, I imagine your tribe was not terribly amused with such a thing. It's why you all left, isn't it? Your people were not nearly as superstitious and wary as the Anshe are today, but... less would've been cause for hysteria with them, I'm certain."

"...*my people*." He snorted softly, looking down to play with Sasha's fur again.

Dilndrou's voice softened."What *happened*, Bastion?"

"We left... before Nef could control the stone, it *hurt them*. Did *horrible things*... and once Nef did get it under control, it was too late." He was very quiet now, wishing he could disappear into the great bear's fur.

Sasha rumbled softly, his ears twitching a bit against Bast's hands; he had heard more than enough now. "I *told you*, Dilndrou. I told you it was too much for them to handle. What now? *You* are responsible for this."

"Don't you DARE say such a thing, Sasha!" Dilndrou howled, slamming his tail into the pools with a loud splash, deeply wounded by the suggestion. "Alchemy is an *essential way of the world!* I did what I *had to do*, just like the rest of us have. You know more than anyone that I'd never knowingly doom my own people! This *Mirajin... it changes everything!"*

" We didn't mean to!" Bastion cried. "It was an accident, and... and I think Kelan blamed Nef for it. For getting us all involved."

Dilndrou's breath rattled in his throat. "He could not have known what had happened. Surely, he believed it was merely a failed Stone until it was too late... what could you, any of you, have done? Though, that is in the past. The real question is what we can do now. He must return to me-- *we* must *speak!"*

"I know... when I go back, I'll tell him. I don't think he expected me to see you while I was gone."

Dilndrou nodded. "After this long, a waiting bit longer can't possibly hurt-- and I'm certain you'd like to catch up with Sasha in the comfort of his grove, wouldn't you? I have much to study into, now... this energy, the village's ruins... mm." The alligator clicked his tongue, suddenly turning to lower himself back into the deep muck of the bog again, his voice bubbling up as he descended.

"The leeches can wait, after all..."

Sasha rose once more, his expression stern. "... he should have never involved you mortals."

"He couldn't keep Nef away from his work, Sasha."

"Playing with the elements, invoking powers that gods only truly comprehend. It is dangerous, and he knows it. He has always known, and yet risked everything he had to spread it. Was his responsibility to prevent trouble, Honey-hair. Will be his responsibility to fix it." The bear shook his head with a low grumble.

"...I hope he won't do anything rash. Nef never meant any harm."

" Dilndrou is not the sort to harm his children. But I do not know what comes next."

"...What about Aqk? I know she's still in contact with Kelan.... I'd want her around to help.*Or rather, to stop the inevitable fighting before it has a chance to start...*"

"There will be no fight in my grove. I tell Vagary leave, I tell *gods themselves* leave if they disrupt my forest... and I do not know what Aqk is up to now. I have not seen her for long time."

Bastion sighed, looking away. He didn't know what else there was to say.

Sasha rumbled. "Do not look so glum. You will always have home here, Honey-hair."

"Thank you, Sasha ...It's been a long time since I last paid my respects. May I do so now?"

The bear-god nodded firmly with a little grunt. He had hoped his Speaker would do so again-- it had been far too long.

Lifting his head and shaking for a moment, he made his way off into the trees once more.

Book II Chapter 8: The Chapters' Audience

The Grand Library of Jetersborough
Jetersborough, South Dreamsong

A great, winged shadow cut across the pristine shore running alongside the Grand Library, far from the first to swoop across the sky in recent times. Yet, this particular shadow was cast by a *feathered* beast, not one of the many wyverns of the Court.

Diving gracefully from the air, the mammoth golden eagle came to a stop upon the beach, pausing for a moment to stretch her wings before tucking them away at her sides, dipping her head to allow her elven passengers to climb down from her shoulder and into the soft, white sand.

The younger of the pair-- clad from head to toe in shining emerald-green armor etched with tiny runes and golden leaves-- reached a gloved hand to help the older elf climb from the raptor's back.
Ensuring he was steady on the ground, he turned his gaze to the bird to run his fingertips gently against her beak.

"I don't know how long this will take... it's been hundreds of years since our last such meeting, and I was in better spirits then," Kelan whispered to the great eagle. "You needn't stay and wait for us."

Needing no further insistence, she spread her wings once more and was off, her powerful wings whipping up a great sandy wind that prompted Kelan to shield his face with his cloak as he led Selarion up to the Library.
The building was even more impressive in the fading light of day, sunset's brilliant oranges and pinks painting the gray stone in dreamlike hues.

Bowing respectfully to the Courtesans tending the front desk, the pair made their way upstairs to a door hidden well behind the bookshelves and tables.

Nefirian wrapped his arms around his knees, quietly taking in the most minute details of Marquise's office as he sat upon a cushion, his hands busy with another.
His long, white robes pooled at his feet, sparkling faintly in the fading light of day, making him seem more a strange, ethereal fairy child than a doctor of any sort.

His large green eyes finally fell upon Marquise; seated at her desk, she quietly sorted through a recent influx of requests for Court assistance and new Courtesans, paying him little mind.

"Your library is as stunning as ever, my dear." His tone was even and warm, his gaze gentle; he was as fond of her as his own son-- and admittedly, spoke with her more regularly.
Lyric was elusive, even for *him,* and utterly disinterested in faction politics-- not that Nef minded or could ever blame him.

"Hmm? ...oh, yes, thank you. Excuse the noise downstairs - we recently aquired some texts from a town market in Liasse, everyone's very excited about them... quite the unexpected find," the Lady responded, not looking up.

"Oh? I was wondering if such commotion was the norm as of late."
Nefirian didn't waste time trying to coax details from her; there were some things the two of them had very much in common, but at least he shared with *family*--

A sudden, sharp knock interrupted his train of thought. Marquise rose to her feet, though she didn't move from her desk. "Come."
The door swung open as Kelan strode in without a moment's hesitation, followed by Selarion.
While the old elf was perfectly composed, the Flamekeeper's expression was an emotionless mask, his true mood plain in his tense stride. He nodded once before taking a seat, lips pursed, head bowed low in thought.

"Kelan... and *Selarion Mimiron*. A pleasant surprise, I'm sure." Her voice was slightly clipped, though her smile was gracious enough. Gesturing the pair over to their choice of seats or cushions, she returned to her seat as two trainee Court members arrived with drinks for her waiting guests.

"Before we begin... I think it goes without saying that anything said within these walls will remain within these walls." The Lady's gaze flickered to Selarion, who nodded gracefully. "We are, all of us, exceptional secret keepers. I think there's little need to change that now," she added.

"Of course," Nefirian agreed smoothly, finally pushing his pillow aside to rest his hands in his lap, raking his sharp nails over the back of his hand. "Our knowledge is ours alone."

"As it has always been," Kelan murmured quietly, not bothering to glance up.

"Now, I understand you've chosen to meet here to discuss the recent developments. I applaud you both for agreeing to this meeting, and I certainly hope it's the start of a resolution between you. You'd do well to remember, however," Marquise warned, "that this is my home, and I won't stand for fighting, in any form. Heated words are one thing - heating each other is quite another."

At the last, she shot Kelan a brief glance which he met with lowered ears and pursed lips; he had enough to worry about without this meeting being skewed against him. "Allow us a chance to discuss our problems before you decide we're here to pull blows, Marquise."

"I would not be so quick to judge if history didn't have such a habit of repeating itself."

Nefirian watched the exchange with guilty eyes as he sipped at his wine. He didn't envy Kelan his losses, no-- but calling a truce here would make things so much easier, something he hoped the other Chapter had come to understand. "I've a wish in my heart that we'll overlook our past differences in favor of the bigger picture, at last..."

His sentiment was returned with a far harder stare from Kelan, however. "...as do I."

"Now..." Nefirian began, pausing to stretch his legs, wrapping his robes neatly around them, "as you are all at least partially aware, Bastion and I have recently witnessed the appearance of a force far greater than the three of us. It was only by Sasha's timely intervention that I lived to tell you of it now-- and it's my understanding that he and this creature we encountered are of very similar beginnings."

" ...*Sasha?* He lives?" Sitting bolt upright, Kelan raised an eyebrow. "I thought Voghn had--"

"Apparently so, though our people are long gone," the doctor sighed."Bastion is off visiting him as we speak, but that's irrelevant to the matter at hand. Sasha, Dilndrou, Aqk, Voghn, the others... I'm starting to suspect that they're *far* from the deities our peoples painted them as. The lowest rung of the ladder, at that. I'm unaware of what Marquise's people have turned up..." He paused for a moment to smile softly at her, his eyes sparkling-- "but mine are seeing troubling evidence that not only is that thing going to reappear in the future, but it may bring *friends*."

"Mm, we're still making sense of it all. Unless, of course, any of you can actually read the runes littering the site, and would care to enlighten us." She smiled, already knowing the answer - the runes themselves were fascinating, not least because it'd been a long time since they last encountered a language they had no experience with.

Nefirian grinned widely, as if sharing some unspoken joke with her."Of course not. My Sagarthay are in absolute *fits* trying to fit the pieces together. To think the statues scattered throughout Aensdoun-- and in Dreamsong as well, did you know?-- that we avoided for years due to our superstitions could be holding so much within them... to say nothing of Opus seeming to be the master key to unlocking *all of it."*

With a soft grunt, Kelan shook his head. Put Nefirian and Marquise in a room without supervision, and they'd likely go on about ancient artifacts until they died of exhaustion.
"While I'm certain your discoveries will prove useful to us in time, should we not focus on what is before us *right now*? Namely, the force you have brought down upon our heads?"

The remark wiped the grin from Nefirian's face at once; Selarion wordlessly placed a hand upon Kelan's shoulder, and the Chapter bowed his head to regain his composure in silence.

"Well, we're off to a good start, I see," Nefirian drawled, clearly unamused. Draining his wineglass in one last gulp, he folded his hands upon his belly. "Forgive me for my digression. The point is... there are powers greater than us that have existed all along. We don't know precisely what they are, or why it's taken this long to make themselves known."

Pausing briefly, he met eyes with Kelan again, daring him to quip again. Met with no resistance, he continued. "It's almost guaranteed that our... "gods" know more of this, but that raises another question. Kelan, you've been working with Aqk since this began. Has she never mentioned any of this, never... tried to correct us in our beliefs? Dilndrou saying nothing doesn't surprise me, and I know little of Sasha beyond what Bast has told me... but *Aqk?* Does she not paint herself as the righteous and honest and noble one?"

The implication took Kelan as a shock; he pursed his lips disapprovingly. "She's never mentioned it to me... and you raise a valid point. But how can you be *certain* of the relation?"

"Sasha spoke to the thing-- *Vagary*, he called it-- as if they knew one another, and also knew how to get rid of it, albeit temporarily. He said..." Nef paused, frowning as realization came over him at once. "...he said that the world was *theirs* now. We've been played for fools, *all our people--"*

"There is far more to this than we can see. But surely, it can't have been malicious!" Kelan protested."They'd done so much for us. They were our protectors and friends and *allies..."*

The Dreamwaker grinned again, his eyes narrowing cruelly now. "Of course. And *what we didn't know couldn't hurt us..."* It was all he could do not to laugh; to think, such allegedly superior beings, capable of the same flaws and ambitions as mortals!
The implications of it were *delicious*; he paid Marquise no mind as her eyes flitted over them both, even as she wrote discreetly on the back of a stray piece of paperwork.

"No," Kelan whispered. "...*no.* I refuse to believe they'd subscribe to that same wretched line of thought..."

"Denial does little to negate what is real, Kelan." The irony of such a statement from Nefirian was not lost on any in the little room.

But Kelan had fallen utterly silent, hanging his head. He didn't need more of his world falling apart, not now, after Valdren and... "I don't-- I *can't* believe you."

Nefirian sighed. "Kelan... I know you're troubled right now. But life and the universe go on despite that. Valdren came of age a long while ago-- shouldn't you trust that he can tend to himself and handle your *own* responsibilities?"

"I unfortunately can't be in several places at once, Nefirian," Kelan spat. "My greatest responsibility at this point in time is gathering the remains of my Firestarters and leading them on, and yet, here I sit with you, discussing something that is *not happening yet*, something you *believe* is going to come about *soon.* My people are lost now!"

"... the *remains?*" Nefirian's voice softened.

"What happened between my son and I is between the *two of us*. But when he left, so too did my second in command, the most visible leader we had, the forefront of our military campaigns. His absence has *not* gone unnoticed by the rest of the faction."

Marquise looked up to arch an eyebrow at Selarion, asking wordlessly if he was going to speak. He responded in kind with a slight nod, urging her to go ahead. "The situation with the Firestarters is, of course, concerning. However, this meeting's focus is on the matter Nefirian's bringing up."

"I can do little to clean up Nefirian's messes *yet again* with a broken faction," Kelan growled, his eyes narrowed.

"Stop making this about *me* and what *I've* done. This concerns *all of us*, and if Vagary is the norm, these things will want to scrub the planet of all of us by virtue of not being their *precious* Elysians!"

"Perhaps it's for the best," Kelan murmured. "Perhaps this is Valenth's final way of defending itself."

Selarion cut into the conversation at last. "Have we not, all of us, charged ourselves with defending this world in some capacity? I struggle to imagine that our duty all along is to stand by and allow this threat to continue."

The Flamekeeper shook his head wearily. "I am so tired of this struggle. I can't... I can't remember a time when my life did not revolve around the preservation of everyone else's lives, including Valenth itself. You..." he gestured to Marquise. "Nothing concerns you unless it threatens the *stasis* you've worked so hard to establish. And you*!"* His odd eyes fell upon Nefirian, harsh and accusatory. "So long as you're free to perform your damn experiments for your own amusement, the fate of the world has *never* concerned you. Now that something with the power to wipe you out of the game for good is on the horizon, *now* you want to talk shop, *now* you want to call an alliance. So you can get the help you need to neutralize the situation and carry on as you always have! I've failed in my duty. I know I have, because I've stood by and looked the other way for centuries as I tried to find a solution that *didn't* end in your demise. *But life isn't so merciful as that, is it?"* Kelan laughed bitterly. "It's not, and you're well aware... that's the driving inspiration behind what you do, after all."

Nefirian stared incredulously at him, his mouth agape in shock. "You peg me as the villain here so readily."

"Aha," said Kelan. *" But do you claim to be something else?"*

"Are you blaming Nefirian alone for all of this?" Marquise asked. "...No, no, you're blaming the Mirajin. Harming Nefirian won't remove the Mirajin from existence, nor the questionable 'harm' it has done. I'm speaking theoretically, since I think we've long established that the exact function of it is unclear, but the Mirajin seems, to me, like a crack in the surface between two states - ours, and this 'dream' state, the one where my mother currently resides. If that is the case, I doubt a direct attack on either the Mirajin or Nefirian wouldn't be a waste of your time, Kelan." She spoke carefully, her voice controlled, her tone non-accusing.

It took so very little for Kelan to fly off the handle.

Once more, the Flamekeeper took another slow breath, his voice suddenly gentle. "The Mirajin has caused this state. While yes... I am beginning to believe that dream energy has always existed here, with the appearance of Vagary... it's *different*, and I don't doubt the crystal is to blame." Kelan wet his lips. "Destroying it would allow us to seal the holes and heal the damage... but you could never allow such a thing, *could you, Nefirian?*"

The little Chapter just gazed silently, sadly up at him. "Is it truly so impossible for you to focus on anything *beyond* that?"

"As impossible as it is for you to see the damage your toy has done to our world, even when it stared you in the face like Death itself," Kelan whispered.

Book II Chapter 9: Tales of Daily Life

Ashgrove Bay Docks
Axl, South Dreamsong

The brilliant light of morning danced over the water's surface, seeming to set the world itself aflame, at least from a human's eyes. Gabe squinted, pushing a stray lock of messy brown hair over his eyes for what relief it could offer before breaking off another piece of the baguette he held, scattering it around his feet and laughing softly as the gulls and pigeons made a mad dash for the little morsels.
He had been here for a while already today, visiting his hungry avian friends from the crack of dawn before making his way to work.

One gull swooped in to land on the wooden bench beside him, trumpeting a loud greeting that made him jump briefly. "Shh-shh-ssh. Not so noisy, mate-- there's plenty here for everyone, huh?"
He held the loaf out for the bold bird to peck at as the others scurried and danced around his feet.

A pair of voices rose in conversation over the crashing waves. Gabe glanced up slightly; an older couple leaned against a shop wall, browsing the latest paper. He turned an ear, hoping to get a few free tidbits out of them.

It'd save him a couple krus for tomorrow's baguette; money was tight for him at the moment, but he knew it'd only get better with time.

"They've found some oil deposits off in Lucsus, apparently. Enough to perhaps start working with it as an energy source."

"Why would you want to do a thing like that? How many idiot scientists have blown themselves into the sky with just a little bit of that stuff? There's at least one report of that happening a week."

"Well, they say it's got the potential to be more efficient than steam, and safer than miracrystal."

A pause.

"Safer than miracrystal? What's so unsafe about it, then? You ever hear of someone blowing themselves up with it?" The couple erupted into laughter, leaving their place against the wall to head slowly up the pier, the rumble and thump of cargo being loaded and unloaded from nearby ships muffling their voices.
"Besides... I don't think MIRACLE is going to let some new competitor snatch away all the business they've gathered for themselves so easy."

Their chatter drifted away at last. Gabe pouted slightly, tearing the unused end away from his baguette to nibble as he pulled his legs up onto the bench, watching curiously as a nearby ship's crew herded an odd, feathery-looking elf-like creature out onto the dock. One man stayed aboard, pointing and barking orders sharply to the others-- the captain of that particular vessel, no doubt.
Gabe shook his head, looking away at last as the elf-thing was ushered out of his line of vision, replaced with a small crowd of human captives.
He didn't think terribly much of the local pirate trade, but it kept the docks interesting.

Getting to his feet, he brushed a few stray crumbs from his button-down shirt, breaking up and scattering the last of the bread before making his way to work, leaving a small crowd of hungry sparrows in his wake.

Book II Chapter 10: Don't Touch That Dial!

The radio crackles and sputters, the knob stuck between stations.
Nevertheless, an excitable announcer manages to blurt an advertisement above the white noise.

Communication-- one of life's greatest wonders.
From telegram to telephone, we have tirelessly sought new, easier, swifter ways of communicating with loved ones from far away.

Radio and telephone line have limited and exclusive useage and reach, even in our age of technological advancement and wonder; sending a live messenger is not always practical or safe, and sending a bird can be impractical and expensive.

How, then, does one reach out to those dear and important to us in an hour of need, when it matters most?

The same company known throughout the world for safe, efficient energy solutions and the award-winning varanius is proud to release its newest project:

Introducing the new "Lodica" Long Distance Carrier from MIRACLE.

Capable of reaching flight speeds of up to 34 miles (54 km) an hour, recording and replaying up to fifteen seconds of speech, and running for up to 24 hours of continuous service with state-of-the-art new rechargeable mirashard technology, the Lodica is the messenger of the future.

Send your Lodica anywhere across the globe to deliver your most important messages without fail!

It can hover, fly backwards or forewards, and sense obstacles in its path and maneuver around them with ease.

Once it delivers its message, it can be recorded over by the recipient and sent back to you with a reply!

The Lodica: Be Heard-- Anywhere.
Now available at MIRACLE Energy offices worldwide.

Book II Chapter 11: Fairytale

Silent Rose Headquarters - Axl Branch
Axl, South Dreamsong

Gabriel Gaunthier checked in at the front desk, pausing to have a brief but friendly chat with the secretary at work there as she gave him his assignments for the day in a neat white folder.
Flipping through them, he made his way across the pristine grand hall (taking a deep breath of air to savor the fragrance of the roses in bloom throughout it) and into the door marked "employees only" in a font far too graceful and elegant to be remotely threatening.

Plush blue carpeting squished under his feet as he made his way, down and deeper down into the complex without descending a single step. The headquarters was built with spiraling slopes and doorless hallways beyond the entrance point-- to reduce the risk of stumbling in case one needed to flee the building. It was a thought that filled Gabe with a mild sense of excitement and dread; he'd yet to see such an event come to Axl Headquarters, but everyone here knew that the day they decided it'd never happen to them would be the day the entire building would be devoured from the bottom up by ancient creatures of the deep earth who just happened to awaken hungry for modern architecture.

Lost within his thoughts of massive black tentacles squeezing the building flat like an empty can, Gabe trod upon something soft that smooshed and squirted a blob of purple ichor out beneath his shoe with a rather rude sound. Cringing in disgust, he lifted his foot to eye the sticky, stringy goo dripping from his heel.

"Oh, come *on!* I don't even want to know how much that's gonna cost to get out of the rug," he muttered.
Something about the goop was unnervingly familiar, but just as he began to slip his shoe off for a closer look, a great crash rang out from a few paces down the hall, broken glass tinkling against tile.

The rug forgotten, the young scientist rushed to his lab-apartment door, testing the knob. Locked. But how...? Wrestling with his key, he quickly threw the door open.

His laboratory was a wreck-- broken beakers and vials scattered across the floor with their former contents (some of which were eating holes into the tile), chemicals painting the furniture and walls, notebooks and specimens soaked, dissolved, ruined.

Gabe's heartbroken wail echoed into the hallway as he carefully stepped inside. He had never made copies of his key, so no sentient had gained access-- and the company's survarani weren't prone to destructive behavior, even during malfunctions. Quickly working to salvage what he could, he gazed around the room with a soft sigh; he didn't have the money to replace everything that had been destroyed, even without taking into consideration his priceless worknotes.
As he gathered and cleaned, a small violet object bounded just into his peripheral vision; he stopped and whipped his head around to look.

Nothing.

Frowning, Gabe set back to work again, and the thing reappeared. Without turning his head, he slowly looked to the side as cautiously as he could manage, but gasped in shock a moment later.

This time, it didn't flee; it simply gazed back at him with huge red eyes. It appeared to be a tiny, nondescript blob of purple... *stuff*, two limp-looking limbs hanging at its sides, a smattering of striped quills poking from a shoulder. Eyeing him curiously at first, it suddenly grinned ridiculously before shuffling away behind a stack of unbroken beakers, its little body flipping and flopping to and fro as if it was two steps away from being made of liquid.

Gabe's memory returned to the squishy thing he'd stepped on in the hallway.

Lab-gremlins-- tiny scraps of living, breathing miraplasm.

But lab-gremlins don't really exist!, he thought, as more of the tiny blob-creatures seemed to shuffle and roll and drip from every corner of the room.

Book II Chapter 12: Tales of Daily Life II

Ashgrove Bay Auction House
Axl, South Dreamsong

The Auctioneer banged her gavel three times, silencing the hall as the sold lot-- a meek-looking silisk woman with big, soulful black eyes-- was led away to the back pens for pickup.
The wealthy attendants here were hardly excited for *her*; most sentients were run-of-the-mill auction fodder, with exceptional specimens fetching a little bit more than usual, but nothing to write home about.

No, it was this next lot everyone was eager to bid on. She grinned slightly, gesturing with gavel in hand for the guards to bring the set in for display.

At once, the crowd's excitement mounted, and she licked her lips. The commission from this would have her set for a while to come, without a doubt...

"...And here we have Lot 44958; three pieces. A trio of harpies from the lost continent of Aensdoun. *Bidding starts at 500,000 krus."*

The creatures-- one female, two male-- shuffled onto the stage upon great, scaly black feet, long ears and crests pressed flat behind them, eyes wide and wild with fear. Undeniably humanoid, they resembled elves with a fine coat of lustrous blue and black feathers and wicked claws.

One of the males struggled weakly in its bonds, the female glowering out over the crowd gathered beneath them before unleashing a sorrowful chirping cry.

Everyone gasped; the hall filled with flickering number cards. Confused and frightened, the harpies crowed and clicked and cawed, raising and bouncing their crests in response to the strange white feathers that seemed to signal to them.

The auctioneer grinned broadly as the bids continued to fly up.
Kelan bless Valenth's stupid, gullible upper class... always so very eager to part with their money.

Book II Chapter 13: Jelly

Silent Rose Headquarters - Axl Branch
Axl, South Dreamsong

"Here they are, my friends, in the... *flesh-like substance*," Gabriel announced with a flourish of his hand towards the tiny terrarium.

Within it, several colorful creatures bobbed and bounced and dripped from the sides of the glass, burbling and giggling and melding with one another only to pull apart again with a wet *pop*.

"What in the *hell*," one doctor gasped.
"…. Lab-gremlins?! But they don't really *exist!*" another breathed, placing her hand to her lips in astonishment.

"I trod upon one on the way to my lab-apartment, and found several more laying waste to it inside. There were at least a dozen of them-- some melted away into nothing, others squeezed into cracks and fled. It was only by a stroke of luck that I managed to capture these three before they followed suit," Gabriel said.
"The question is... if the sayings are true, why would they have shown up in *my* lab? I'm not a leupologist or mirologist."

"Hm," said one of the doctors-- *Ms. Adelphi Trauss*, if her nametag was any indication. "A creature that appears as a result of large quantities of mirajin being refined in a small area, from the residue left after the process... appearing in a standard researcher's lab."
She tucked a pencil into her brown hair, tightly wound into a bun. "We don't do leupology in this building... and there aren't a whole lot of other explanations, even before we get into the whole fantasy versus reality argument."

"In other circumstances, I would point out the very nature of what we do," the second doctor, one *Gregori Lardevich*, added. "Reality is but a veil and all that sort of thing. Still... with no such source of mirajin energy anywhere around here, the only possible explanation is... *unsettling*."

Gabriel watched the tiny mirajin-creatures bounce and bob in the tank. "But... if that was the case... more of them would surely begin to appear, won't they?"
He frowned; he didn't much like the sound of this, but as long as this was an isolated incident--

"That's why we agreed to meet with you after such a frivolous claim, Mr. Gaunthier," Gregori muttered.

Book II Chapter 14: Shadows in the Dark

The Forest of Giants
Einstall, Schalle

A herd of sturdy, silver-furred deer with eyes like little blue stars and horns that curled tall above their ears strode briskly through the deep wood, an occasional bleat or snort the only sound that cut into the melodic cricket-song of twilight.

Upon the beasts' backs rode two *Aeneski* each, their weathered, stern faces hidden beneath thick hoods, their breath misting at their lips. The elves were clad in dull, lightweight armor with only carved branches, hollowed, decorated gourds and woven sinew disks hanging from their sides; not a weapon, blunt, sharp or otherwise was had among the lot.

And yet, they knew there was nothing in these forests *they* need fear.

A single, crisp voice rose over the sounds of night for a brief moment; more of an animal cry than a spoken word, the vocalization was understood by every member of the traveling party-- elf and buck alike-- and the group slowed to a stop.

Their leader turned upon her buck to sit with both knees turned outward, cupping her hands over her ears for some relief from the chill air. She chattered her teeth and clicked her tongue, her lips curling as she rattled on to those who sat and listened.
An owl in the distance hooted in reply, and the elves bowed their heads solemnly.

No one else in all the world had what they had, this gift they shared with their ancestors and heirs alone. Their language was primal, sacred, and decipherable only by the wilds themselves.

This was what it truly meant to be a part of this land-- to be one of the *rangers*.

The elves rose their hands towards the dimly-lit canopy as the night-bird flitted overhead, framed by Chira's violet-blue light.

Onward, the Anshe woman chattered and cuckooed.
Onward-- we must ask of the land and its servants where we begin.

Quick and graceful as flowing waters, the herd leapt into action once more, dipping and weaving through the massive trees towards their destination, lithe and powerful shadows in the dark.

Book II Chapter 15: The Vital First Step

The Forest of Giants
Einstall, Schalle

The elven party sat in a wide circle around a roaring fire, their hoods tossed over their shoulders, their steeds grazing quietly just behind them.
The star deer listened to the conversation as intently as any other curious passerby would've; the language spoken was one they had grown accustomed to over many generations.

They would never learn to speak it, but they *understood* well enough, and their graceful ears turned and flicked at the implications of the heavy words being traded now.

"This has never been a matter of war, E'lenoa. We've said it at least a thousand times... You cannot fight *a vital essence of the world!"*
The Anshe woman caught the Dremish elf in her dangerous eyes and her voice fell away to nothing. One eye golden, the other stark, deep violet, they flickered in the firelight as though they belonged to some fearful beast.

Depending upon who you asked, they did.

"And do you think they hear our voices over the sounds of their own proud hearts beating? We may be under the same banner, but we're fodder to them, if even that much. My people-- *your ancestors*, may I add-- had been on this little planet for a thousand years or more before the Flarion came into the picture, and if some of the rumors we've heard are true..."
She paused, chewing on a lock of dull brown hair, "If they're true... we're *all* bound by blood. But they refuse to so much as acknowledge the tales, let alone admit or deny them, and we're left to scramble to preserve the land as they flap off to *cleanse* it, or so they say, like so many great, drunken bats. But with the Prince out of the picture, at least for the time being..."

"With the Prince out of the picture, they may be more open to suggestion," an even voice finished; its owner, a Dremish elf by the name of Iren, pursed his lips slightly. His hair and eyes were the color of wine, his skin a mellow shade of warm brown. "Lord Val'aldreni has always single-handedly urged his children into blind rage. He sought to prove his worth to the Bright One at any cost, and he always intended to do it by scouring Valenth of his enemies-- whoever or whatever that might be at any point in time. And while he crafted a formidable army to combat the morte-bound with, they are a malicious bastardization of *life*. The planet itself has verified that mirajin has always existed."

Soft murmurs rose throughout the camp as elves spoke amongst themselves in hushed tones.
Iren was a senior member, almost as much so as the intimidating Anshe woman, and one of the few who would speak to-- or even *of*-- her without fear.
Both elves had risen considerable points... but they were a handful of mortals. What could *they* expect to do to influence the remainder of the Flarion flight?

Now, Iren and E'lenoa exchanged glances. "It's in our best interests to learn what we can, and use that knowledge to both replenish Valenth and revive our order. If the Flarion can be cooled down and made to do this the right way, all the better," Iren continued. "Mutants can't be returned to their original selves, but... there must be a way to neutralize the malignant energies, be it on a case-by-case basis or on a global scale."

"I think we could do for starting small and working our way up." E'lenoa chewed on her lip with a thoughtful look. "We all caught wind of when the mirajin began to settle just a few months ago. It didn't last, but it's *possible*... that means it's time for us to start learning how to create such a change, instead of our current *burn everything and plant seeds in the ashes method*." She smirked, leaning back to fondly stroke her stag's white muzzle.

"Someone call up an owl, would you? Tell theLassenmages we've got something interesting for them."

Book II Chapter 16: Courting Day is Here!

The Regent Square
Jetersborough, South Dreamsong

As dusk falls on the city of Jetersborough, an eager hush falls over the thousands of people congregating in the square, all eyes fixed on the stage before them. The month of courting has begun once more, and as tradition dictates, Courting Day looks set to open the celebrations with a bang.

The street dancers stop twirling, the vendors cease calling... even the birds seem to cease their evening song as a solitary beam of light casts the stage in a silvery glow. A moment, and a lone masked figure steps out into it.

Her voice carries easily in the warm sea breeze, lilting pleasantly as she speaks.

"Welcome, friends, to the start of another joyous celebration - an evening of entertainment, of cultural discovery, of unity between the Court, and the gracious peoples that have welcomed us into their homes. Without them, without you, and the stories and experiences you've shared with us, surely such a day could not be possible."

The figure offers a bow to the crowd, which instantly erupts into enthusiastic applause, stomping their feet and chanting excitably. When the commotion finally dies down, the figure speaks again.

"Without further ado, I'd like to introduce this year's presentation - I believe some of you here tonight may well be familiar with the tale. With music from none other than the Court's finest musicians, and dance from our finest performers, and the acting talents of.... well, quite frankly the *terrible* Ecleco--"

Another roar from the crowd, this time of laughter, and a shaking fist pops momentarily from the curtains behind the speaker, clearly outraged at such an unjust sentiment. Unconcerned, the speaker goes on.

"I present a story of love transcending borders, of stength in the face of adversity... of a brave young ochy, and the man who sees beyond the price of her skin."

With this, the woman bows again, and gracefully leaves the stage, as the curtains come up, the show begins.

The aftershow is as vibrant and colourful as always, with people filling the streets to dance along with the musicians, or enjoy the entertainment, or sample the array of exotic foods on offer.

On one corner, another masked Courtesan, his form that of a handsomely jewelled chimaera, conjures fire from the air and performs daring stunts with a grace that belies his size; across the street, a pair of Courtesan viadantes (a truly unusual sight!) paint the faces of children and spirited adults with colourful symbols and tiny jewels.

Back towards the square, music plays to the dancing crowd, with aeneski and human dancers scattered throughout, twirling gracefully with long sashes and conjured explosions of seasonal flowers. In the night sky above, an entire squadron of erosion drakes, most likely Courtesans in training, wheel and circle and dive like courting birds, with sashes of their own to toss back and forth and dodge in and out of. Now and again, one flies low with various goodies for the revellers below - candies, blossoms, even tiny Court-themed trinkets are on offer for those quick enough to catch them.

To anyone on the street below, the party has only just begun.

Book II Chapter 17: Prize

Ashgrove Bay Auction House
Axl, South Dreamsong

The cage was a cacophony of whooping, screeching, howling, all violent fury and drifting, torn feathers.
He made himself as tiny as possible in the far corner, hoping to vanish into a little ball of invisible fluff as the two elder birds tore at one another on the other end, drawing frightened attention from the other captives in the storage room.

As swiftly as it had begun, it was over; the female sat, angry and bloodied, over the remains of the older male harpy, now intent on catching her breath and cleaning herself of the dark red smears over her blue and black plumage.

The little one clucked softly, huddling deeper into his own feathers. The sound of footsteps caught his attention, and he turned his head just enough to watch several men approach, talking as they came.

One came close-- a sleek, cunning-looking creature with dark plumage -- eyeing the contents of the cage appraisingly, a disapproving frown upon his lips. He turned to speak to another behind him, equally sure of himself, but larger with all manner of tiny, colorful beads and trinkets tucked into his plumage, and a tall, brilliant crest. This one stuck his chest out pridefully, though he seemed mildly dejected as the smaller one began to speak.

"...well, it's no longer a breeding pair," the sleek one began. "I'll have to take that out of the final price. The remaining male is likely her son, which won't do at all."
The little harpy listened from his corner as the pair spoke, occasionally glancing over to him or the preening female, or pointing at the slain harpy, which she had begun to nibble at now and again.

These strange birds had no wings, and their voices were dull, devoid of any hint of song.
The big one seemed mildly, unsettlingly familiar; the little harpy decided to inch away from the front of the cage to settle in a back corner, wrapping his arms around his face and closing his eyes. He was certain this was the one who'd led the attack against his flock, ultimately capturing the three of them and dragging them here... wherever here was.

"They were wearing these when we found them," the big one said, holding up two small, worn bird-shaped masks, one made of tanned leather, the other crudely-sculpted clay, cracked and beginning to crumble. "You can have 'em if you want."

The little harpy glanced up again, lifting his crest slightly with a soft cluck-- that was *his mask!*
Puffing his feathers in frustration, he tried to soothe himself with thoughts of home as more feet approached, followed by a loud, mechanical clicking.

"Get those two packed up for shipping out. The House'll handle the dead one."

Book II Chapter 18: Memories of the Cauak

The rustle of leaves, the soft whip of beating wings, the endless, musical chatter of his own kind surrounded him.
The sky was blue, a blue so rich and brilliant that it nearly matched the hue of their plumage, but not quite.

He inched farther along the branch that he perched upon, eager to have his next lesson with his new mentor, but smarter than to wander off in search of the older bird.
His birth-flock had seen him off not even a week ago; if he crossed paths with them, or any other flock, for the matter, his life would be cut dreadfully short, dreadfully swiftly.

And so he stayed put, fluffing his feathers and having a groom as he waited.

At this point in his life, he would learn from the harpy who had taken him under his wing; hunting with this new, all-male flock, charming the gullible featherless birds who seemed so easily tricked, sharing their sweet, soft flesh with the group-- likely eating last, for now, but that would change in time.
He would also be taught-- in time, as well-- how to pay proper homage to Cauakaa, the Great Jay, so that she might share her wile and wit with him as she had so many others of their kind.
She had created them in her image and even given them her name, after all, and it was well known how she regarded servants who failed to admire her.

Growing confident, the young male drew in a deep breath and chattered--

--only to be jerked from his reverie by the sound of wood slamming against wood. Chirping indignantly, he rose to his feet with a sigh.

Again, he was caged, though now he was *alone*. His arms began to ache and burn again as the veil of sleep slowly crept away from his brain.

It had never occurred to him that there was a place away from Aensdoun that he might have cause to miss it, someday.

Book II Chapter 19: Good Terms

The Grande Museum of Natural Sciences

GIER, SOUTH DREAMSONG

"Thank you for opting to share this discovery with us, Doctor Gaunthier."
"Ah, Gabe is fine. I'm still just a student," Gabriel admitted bashfully, looking down at the tabletop.

The little conference room tucked away deep within the heart of the Grande Museum was as warm and cozy as it was attractive, lit with soft orange antique lamps and furnished with fine darkwood chairs, well-adorned with plush pillows.

He allowed himself to relax against the long table even as his eyes darted to and fro across the room to take it all in. Before him sat a miniature, reinforced specimen tank, containing one of the mischevious blobs of goo that had recently infiltrated his beloved lab-apartment. Gabe realized he was unconsciously avoiding her gaze, and looked up at last.

He knew the Somnambulist Project would find the lab-gremlins interesting... but he in no way anticipated *Miss Christoph herself* traveling here to see them!

"Of course, Gabe," Elliot said with a gentle smile, carefully tugging her gloves more firmly over her hands. "Short for Gabriel, I take it? It's a lovely name, very distinguished."

Gabe's cheeks grew red, and he looked away again. The lab-gremlin was amusing itself within the tiny tank by doing somersaults in the suspension fluid.

"Thank you. Um... you can keep this specimen, if you like. We ended up with lots of them; there's something going on with our le--"

The young scientist-in-training caught himself, swallowing quickly and chewing on his lip. He didn't know how much the Somnambulists-- *even Elliot herself*-- were clear to be told, and caution was always the best policy in this line of work.

"Hmm?" Her tone was gentle and full of good humor as she peered curiously up at him.
"Our, ah..." Gabe cursed his timing; there weren't terribly many things beginning with *le* he could use convincingly here.
Scratching his cheek, he glanced at the ceiling above Elliot in the hopes a word would spontaneously form on the blank wall.

Elliot took note of his stalling, but responded with no more than a soft chuckle.
The Silent Rose's vows of secrecy were known throughout Valenth, and such a fresh face would likely have encountered precious few situations in which to practice keeping them. "It's no matter, Gabe. We're incredibly grateful for the donation, regardless of the circumstances behind it."
Carefully lifting the tank, Elliot smiled as the tiny blob-creature zoomed around within like a startled fish. "So, you say these were formerly... an urban legend of sorts among your company?"

"Oh, yes. There are... *specific circumstances* that are said to cause them to appear. My lab didn't meet the criteria, and yet I found them practially dripping from the walls. They wrecked most of my stuff. My journals, my equipment..." Gabe sighed wistfully, fidgeting his hands against the table. "Ever since that, I've been talking with my superiors about the entire situation, but once that's over, I don't know how I'm going to complete my semester. I can't start my studies over from scratch!"

"Well, Gabe," Elliot smiled warmly, removing her glasses briefly to clean them with her handkerchief, "I'd certainly hate for you to lose out because of a small misfortune, so I'll tell you what I'll do..."

Book II Chapter 20: The Golden Sea

The Al-Exa Dunesea, Lucsus

The nomadic lifestyle of the chimaera is trying on even the more hardened species of Valenth, but the young Courtesan was trying her best, straying only a little behind the rest of the group as it plodded dutifully across the dunes.

She had, at their request, assumed their form while she served her purpose with them, and the wide paws and stocky body made for a surprisingly steady travel style - she didn't sink down far, and despite her fur, she wasn't overly uncomfortable.

If only they would stop and rest, just for a little while.

It was still early in the day, and so her prayers would go unanswered for a few hours yet. They had been moving since the evening before, but it wouldn't be until the suns were high in the sky, and the sand beneath her paws all but crackled in the baking heat, that they would seek shelter and rest their weary feet, and she might have another opportunity to speak with the group's elders.

They had been welcoming and open with her up until now, and had even taught her a few tricks to aid her survival in this harsh environment. In return, she had told them of other cultures, and of the bustling community of her home in Jetersborough. This particular group had never been, and were quite unlikely to, being so very far away, and without any real purpose there. These were a simpler breed to the chimaera she knew from the city, though simple in lifestyle alone - they were as shrewd and quick-witted as any of their kind.

They certainly knew how to barter, if their brief stay at a town market had been any indication. It posed some interesting questions on the nature of social skills, and one she was looking forward to bringing up at the next Courtesan assembly.

So distracted was she, that at first the Courtesan didn't notice when the head of the line stopped, and she bumped rather abruptly into the back end of the chimaera in front of her. The female just smiled gently, amused, and together they shuffled closer to the front to find out the cause of their delay.
The elders, a male and female pair, were standing atop the dune in their more humanoid forms, dwarfed by the remaining beasts, and beyond them... a sea of sand, no signs of life, nothing but shining gold.

"We rest here until nightfall. It is no longer safe to travel by daylight." The female announced, and moved to her closest companion to start unpacking the camping material from his back, soon assisted by other bronzed figures, climbing up onto the chimaera's backs like those strange reptiles that cling to walls, apparently unafraid of losing their grip... or a foot, as one or two found their way to a ledge between a beast's ears, or the bridge of a muzzle.

The Courtesan offered her own help as best she could, even as she trembled with curiosity - what was so dangerous to stop them now? They were an intimidatingly large group, at least by most standards, and surely they'd be easier to ambush under the cover of night, rather than on the wide open plains before them. She bit her tongue for the time being, however, remembering one of the few rules she'd been introduced to the group with. She was to wait, and save any and all questions for a time when the elders offered to indulge her.

They would not be bothered unnecessarily - even the young chimaeras knew better than to pester the adults without permission.

The camp was set up in short order, using the wave-like shape of a neighbouring dune as a breaker against the wind, however slight. With the tents and various supplies unloaded, the group had all reverted to their humanoid forms, with most taking the opportunity to doze in any available shade... all but the Courtesan, who remained as she was, and panted quietly next to a tent far too small to accomodate her.

She might assume their form, but that didn't include the ability to change between the two possessed by the chimaera race. It had been under the advice of the elders that she'd chosen the beast form over the humanoid one. These particular ones seemed to treat the humanoid form as

a disguise more than anything else, and had felt strongly that this was more appropriate if she wished to fit in. It was a decision offered to any group that accepted a Courtesan into their midst, and she had no real complaints. They certainly offered her enough water, for which she was deeply grateful.

...If only the elders would offer to let her sit with them, but they were absorbed in coversation on the outskirts of the camp, using sticks to draw in the sand as they spoke in hushed voices.

Her questions, it seemed, would have to wait.

She wasn't sure when she had fallen asleep, but when the Courtesan woke, everything around her was swathed in darkness, with the moon only just peeking out from the clouds above. The air had cooled noticably, and she felt relaxed and well rested, her fur shifting gently with the soft breeze.
It would have been blissful, and a moment to enjoy, if not for the sheer, eerie silence.

Rising to her feet, the Courtesan moved to nudge at the flaps of the nearest tent, just enough to peer inside and check for occupants. This one appeared to be empty, with the few belongings inside in an odd little sunken heap. The next tent offered similar results, and it was with no small amount of concern that she bounded over to the area usually restricted to the elders. Their drawings in the sand, the dying fire... and empty tents. There were no footprints around the camp to betray which way they'd gone... but of course, unless they'd left moments before, there never would be.
The sand shifted too quickly out here, covering tracks almost as soon as they appeared... where were they?

Nervous now, she moved back across the camp to her resting spot, sniffing at the air in the hopes of catching a trace of her companions... and when the ground beneath her paws shifted with nothing short of a sickening lurch, she thought for a moment that her nerves were getting the better of her, making her feel lightheaded.

She paused, staring down to focus her thoughts... and the ground rolled again, moving like stormy water under her feet.

...And then, *stillness*.

She should take to the sky as an Erosion, and scout for her companions that way, her instincts told her. She should try and work out where they'd come from, and retrace their steps, or find a village where she could ask for help. She should--

The ground beneath her exploded, and even as her wings were forming, she felt herself being dragged down, felt something tear, felt something else break with a dull crunch, and there was sand in her eyes, her nose, in her mouth... choking her, all around her, and she couldn't...

Couldn't...

The sand where the young Courtesan had been standing moments before smoothed out with the next gentle gust of desert air, and silence fell on the camp once more.

Book II Chapter 21: Delicacies of the Mind

The Adephagius Restaurant
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Doctor Dreamscar slipped into the restaurant from the front door, carefully avoiding trodding upon a nearby surveillance varanius as he made his way into the grand hall, offering a wam smile and courteous wave of the hand to his patrons.
He paused to examine the Adephagius fountain, carefully rubbing off a tiny spot of dirt with his thumb before continuing across the floor, around the fancy tables and diners, past the front desk and kitchens to stand before *the door*.

Someone always glanced up when he arrived at this particular portal; some curious mind aching for even the barest glimpse at what lay beyond it, unknown to all eyes but his own, and those who served him with some measure of loyalty.

Adjusting his monocle upon his eye, he slipped a hand into his fine white suit and withdrew a box of cigars, lighting one and taking a leisurely pull as he closed his eyes and watched a room that believed him lost in thought.

His patrons gazed up at his back, up at the great metal door with eager, hungry eyes; some leaned closer to companions to direct their attention there, to whisper theories of what someone could possibly want guarded so well within the basement of a top-rate restaurant.
With no hints of what could be down there beyond the apparent value or danger involved in it, one's mind was free to wander uninhibited, dreaming up the most complex and delicious conspiracies one could concoct.

Was it a simple food preparation facility, a series of meeting rooms, perhaps?
Or something more sinister, something full of massive gears and pulleys and big red buttons that aught not to be pushed *Or Else*, something full of rows and rows of cages where victims, some aware of their impending fates, others more lucky, awaited their turn to adorn someone's plate?

Nefirian wet his lips and grinned, expelling a swirling cloud of cherry-scented smoke before unlocking the door and swinging it slowly open, taunting, teasing, holding it steady with the toe of his shoe.

Imagine, he thought, reveling for one final moment in the energy building within their eager, curious minds.
Imagine...what business might a fellow conduct beneath a restaurant?

What, indeed.

A faint, fleeting scent, coppery and wet, with a hint of something that smelt unmistakably *arcane*, mixed with the heady fragrance of his cigar as he slid, slow and deliberate, into the door with a logo of four intertwined roses beneath an eye etched into the back side--

The side that few ever saw.

Book II Chapter 22: Spirits of the Desert

The sands of Lucsus burn hotter than any desert on Valenth-- save perhaps the sands beneath the feet of the wandering flame elementals of Liasse.

And yet, as extreme places tend to do against all odds, they still harbor life, life of all kinds.

Somewhere in the harsh, scorching desert, tiny creatures sleep in sandy dens, waiting for the sun to set... waiting for the air to cool, for its favorite meals to rise from their own slumber and dance into their mouths.

A tiny fennec awakens itself with a sneeze, its nose momentarily tickled by a brush of its bushy tail.

High above, the twin suns still shine.

Book II Chapter 23: Whispers of Ages Past

Grove of the Sunken Idols
Aensdoun

Degregorius rose high in the sky over Aensdoun, painting the pristine forests and meadows in its radiant blue light even as it blocked little Ciere partially from view, her yellow radiance washed away in her brother's shine.

The Grove of the Sunken Idols seemed to dance in the light breeze that tickled its boughs, sunlight dappling the forest floor below, briefly flitting across squirrels and foxes darting along the brush, over little songbirds making their way from branch to branch in short bursts, hopefully out of the eye of hungry raptors, and over a huge brown beast of a bear, slumbering less than peacefully with a tiny elf clad only in an elkskin kilt tucked in beside him.

The great bear-god Sasha lay in the tall grass, his eyes half-closed, his paws flopped down in front of him. His snout twitched as he grumbled and sighed, his troubles weighing heavily upon his mind.

His distress did not go unnoticed by Bastion; the elf stirred, turning from his resting place against Sasha's massive shoulder.

"Sasha?"

At once, the beast fell silent, his ears pricked. Had he been speaking aloud-- had he been overheard?
One eye widened, rolling back to glance toward the little chapter.

"Honey-hair... did you hear me?"

"You were growling. And it sounds really loud when my ear's against you." Bastion's ears drooped slightly, aware he had been hearing something not meant for him.

"I am sorry. I.... did not mean to wake you." Sasha's eyes closed once more and he turned his head, attempting to coax himself back into slumber.
It would have been far better than lying there, lying there and thinking about the past, about the things that had come to pass in spans of time longer than he could comprehend.

About the things that he had spoken of only to Dilndrou and Aqk, when they were still a trio, and now spoke of to Dilndrou when the moody alligator ascended from his alchemist's palace hidden deep beneath the muck.

Aqk had flown off to survey the world long ago; she had always done so, though this had been the first time she had failed to return.

"What's the matter? ....Maybe I can help?" Bast asked, gently running his fingers through the thick dark fur of Sasha's shoulder.

"You cannot help me, Honey-hair. You *can*, perhaps, hear my confessions. I have wronged you, unwillingly, for a very long while."

Bast frowned, pulling himself into a proper sitting position and meeting Sasha's gaze. "I'll listen, of course."

The bear sat in turn-- more as a gesture of honor than of any necessity-- bowing his head to look down at him.
The blonde elf should not, by any stretch, still be alive; he had been born before Aqk had departed, before Dilndrou had grown sorrowful over the loss of his children, before Voghn had attempted his fatal ambush upon himself and the Grove.

He was far more ancient than any fae, blessed by Chira or not, had any right to be. All of Sasha's Speakers had had cubs, had parted ways, had been killed or died off and been long forgotten... except for Bastion.
Honey-hair, who considered the other bears his family as much, if not more, than any other *Aeneski* from his tribe had ever been.
Always cheerful, always dedicated, up until the day something had *gone wrong* in his tribe's village and he had vanished with two other Speakers, elves that served his eagle and alligator companions, and that strange, magic-sweet scent that reminded him so very much of his charge wafted across the village with the scents of blood and death.

He had thought Honey-hair dead, then, dead or frightened away by whatever had come to pass along with his tribe.

"Little... little *Aeneski*. I will begin from the beginning, as that is the only way I know how to. When I was born, I was a bear. A *normal bear*, smaller than your little arms." Bastion couldn't help smiling at that idea-- Sasha, a tiny cub-- but he kept quiet, his ears alert.

"And so, I would have been until the end of my days, a normal bear... but I was chosen, and taken from my den, and given a *gift*. And I learned to speak, and think, and be something I was *not born to be*. This is what I am now."

"...You were chosen?"

"I was chosen, just as Aqk and Dilndrou and Cauakad and all of the others, every one of them, were chosen-- by those who became their masters. That was many, many ages ago, before your people had come to be what you are now, and a *different* people ruled these lands." Bast nodded and fell quiet again, letting his ears droop once more.

"After the ones who chose us vanished... all of us were made to enter a truce that we would never tell the Small creatures of what had been. But, Honey-hair..." Sasha rumbled, loud and low, hanging his head and blinking his eyes to clear them. "Things are changing, and there are things you must know. The others can come and try to kill me for breaking my oath if they so wish. I have done what I was made to do. Now, I cannot guard any more secrets."

"Why not?" Bastion demanded, furrowing his brow. "Why couldn't you tell us? Why are you telling me now?"

Sasha rose to his feet, towering over Bast, his eyes full of sorrow. His heart ached that he had lied-- lied with silence and secrets, if not words-- for so very long to those he held most dear, even if out of necessity.

"Some of us believed we could prevent the artifact I have guarded from being found and used again if we never spoke of it, if we kept it locked away and guarded. *I* am that guardian, Honey-hair. I have always been, and I have never failed in my duty. But it means nothing. Dilndrou has recognized the energy he has been studying..."

"I don't understand. Guarding what?"

"Come with me, Honey-hair. I will show you, and then... I will explain everything."

The great bear gently scooped him up with a paw, offering a seat atop his back. Bastion climbed up, careful not to tug too hard on the old bear's fur as he settled in between his shoulders.

Sasha made his way into the wood, traveling farther and farther in-- the light beginning to fade as ancient trees blocked the suns with their massive boughs, crickets singing in the welcome darkness, fireflies trailing at the bear's big feet.

The pair continued for what seemed an eternity, down hill after hill, through ever-darkening forest floors, through brief patches of clear glade dotted with ancient stone idols and carvings whose crafters were forever lost to time, past old stones that had felt the kiss of warm sun and sky and sprung to life as gargoyles, mulling absently, harmlessly about on rocky paths... until at last, the massive trees had become fully

shrouded by the shadows of the forest, their dimly-lit bark seeming to glitter faintly as if coated with hardened amber.
The creatures of the wood had fallen worryingly still, only the sound of Sasha's footfall breaking the eerie silence.

"We are almost there," Sasha rumbled.

Bastion hushed his voice, glancing around the dark, mysterious wood with a sort of nervous dread. "I don't think I've ever been this far in before."

"There is nothing to fear here, Honey-hair. *Nothing* has been able to endure this place since our masters and their masters died... That you can endure it confirms my fears, and yet..." The bear-god's voice trailed away into nothing, and he continued ahead.

Suddenly, a single beam of light from above broke through the darkness of the tunnel-like wood, seeming to set the forest itself aflame.
The trees around them had crystalized, completely, along with every shrub, every flower, every blade of grass within the mysterious place, seeming for all the world like a great palace carved of glass, decorated with strange runes and etchings among the roots.

Skeletons, both large and small, lay here and there amongst the trees' roots, all turned to dense, shimmering crystal.

"*This*... is the Sacred Grove.... and I am its guardian," Sasha said, blinking the overwhelming illumination from his dark eyes. "I do not know how long I have protected the entrance to this place, but it has not mattered for almost as long. It kills any foolish enough to approach..."

Bastion looked on in awe, words failing him for the moment. Finally managing to speak, his voice was hushed, subdued by the magnitude of the place. "*What... what caused all of this?*" he whispered.

Sasha dipped his head, shaking it for a moment before continuing on his way down the shimmering path, his heart pounding within his great, furry chest.
At last, he came to a final stop, sitting down and lifting a great paw to gesture at a massive, glowing structure before them, burning with a radiance beyond all else, save perhaps the suns themselves...

...a crystal, larger than even *him*, seated atop a massive, ornate stand carved from some unknown metal and decorated with more ancient runes of the same hand that adorned the trees before.

"...that."

Bast drew a sharp breath, flattening his ears, regarding the crystal with a strange sense of recollection that shook him to his very core. *"...That... that's a..!"*

"...do you recognize it, Honey-hair?"

Surprise and shock were as plain in Sasha's voice as they were upon Bastion's face. "It looks like... like what Nef made. But this one's a *lot bigger!"*

"No...*impossible,*" Sasha growled softly.

Book II Chapter 24: Behind Closed Doors

The Adephagius, Basement Floor
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

"...you... you and I..."

Nefirian lay atop a table in one of the private diningrooms beneath the Adephagius, his jacket thrown over a nearby chair, his hand pressed firmly against his pulsing, aching head.

The room was grand and ornate; tiny golden birds flew across a rich red wallpaper, accented with delicate scrollwork; a fireplace burned low at one end, throwing a warm orange glow over all. The chandelier glittered overhead, its facets casting their own tiny pinpoint lights onto walls and floor and table and *Aeneski*.

He was, however, in no state to enjoy the beauty around him; lost within his own mind, lost in the pulsing ripples of energy held within, brilliant as any diamond.

"...you and I, we are inseparable..."

The crystalline voice echoed within him, through his head, down his spine, coursing through his blood and muscles and bones. He was not, he was *never* afraid, but when it came like this, it shook him to his core and it was all he could do to lie still and listen.

The scientist groaned, pressing both palms hard against his forehead.
Underneath, something flickered and writhed beneath the skin.

"...my hands... you are my hands," it insisted. *"...you are my hands, my eyes... my window. The world... we must know, we must learn..."*

Nefirian bit his lip, gasping softly as a bead of fresh blood welled up beneath his teeth. "Yes," he groaned. "Your..."

"...so many things to be done..." The colors and light and energy shifted and whirled inside him, and he rolled onto his side, curled into a ball, sighed and groaned and ground his feet against the table.
"...preparations to make... people to find... scores to settle... research... preparations..."
The voice rose and fell, tinkling and chiming; one moment, the sound of a crystal bell, the next, almost his own but not quite right.

"As long as we have one another, we are infinite," Nefirian murmured slowly in the wrong voice.
A sharp, hot pain cut down his forehead, drawing an agonized shriek from him.
Pulling his trembling hands away, he lowered his head and drew a slow, deep breath.

Blinking carefully, his third eye adjusted itself to the light before taking in the private dining room's beauty.

"A moment to rest...and then, we'll begin at once."

Book II Chapter 25: The Visitor

Lassenbhurg, Liasse

The streets of Lassenbhurg were busy as ever, chock full of human and elf, chimaera and silisk, going on about their daily business in the shops, libraries, apothecaries and arcaniums that dotted the city of magi.

Strange creatures were commonplace here, as trade from all corners of the globe ensured a steady supply of curiosities to study, purchase and simply parade about, provided they could be controlled (the griffins were particularly irritable, especially when a horse happened by upon the street).
The elemental wanderers that came to see the sights from the North and South ends of the continent were flamboyant and fascinating, with their colorful skins and strange clothing, undoubtedly conjured out of thin air to better fit in with a city full of civilized folk.

(Disagreements among the people of fire and water were common on the outskirts of town, but policed quite sternly within it; one incident had resulted in flash flooding and a terrible fire that had nearly destroyed one of Lassenbhurg's most important historical neighborhoods. The parties responsible were deeply guilty for what they had caused, and agreed upon a truce to be held while within Lassenbhurg itself, much to the relief of its local people.)

None, however, were expecting the fellow who had traveled there today. He was tall, taller than a human or Aeneski by at least a foot, dwarfing the humanoid chimaera who eyed him up without the barest hint of discretion; perhaps he was something that could fetch a nice bit of coin back in Lucsus, if only he could be caught off-guard in an empty alleyway.
His flesh was covered in dull, green-gray scales that seemed to hint at silisk ancestry, if not for the fact that no silisk came in such drab colorations, hybrid or otherwise, and he had only a single pair of watery blue eyes. His hair was wiry and white, pulled back into a long, single braid that whipped against his back like a tail.

Clad in a rather archaic-looking, dirty gray toga with strange characters scrawled across them in black ink, he seemed something from another time, perhaps a confused creature who had wriggled forth from some ancient fantasy tale.
Those eyes darted to and fro across the streets as he went, seeming to pick up every detail and consume it with a frightening hunger for knowledge, tucking every scrap and morsel away for further consideration later. He slipped gracefully past the disobedient griffins, around the horses and land-drakes and captive rampant dragons-- *what splendid specimens these are, splendid and yet so familiar*, he thought.

Onward he traveled for what seemed like forever on these tiny, unsteady little legs that weren't truly his, down a road of glittering jewels and golden storefronts, full of magi and alchemists and all sorts of creatures (are those silisks over there, really?) that made him yearn to stop and ask a few questions, just for a *little while*, and see what he could learn.

But he was nothing if not well-disciplined, and so the mysterious, scaly traveler went ahead on his way, stopping at last before the grandest building in all Lassenbhurg, if not all Liasse itself;

The Academy of Arcana.

"Maena would be so very proud of what you have accomplished here, o Lady Chira," he whispered with tearful joy.

Book II Chapter 26: Pulse

Aqk's Peak, Schalle

"We're leaving to find Valdren," the flarion said simply, her wings already spread in preparation.
There were sixteen of them, apparently led by the elder female, gazing coldly down at Kelan atop Aqk's Peak, their eyes giving away what they dared not say aloud.

We preferred his *leadership*.

"I assume, then, that you won't be returning." His tone was even, guarded; he had long since stopped mourning his son's sudden decision and the harsh words that had come with it. It was time to begin focusing on what needed doing, with or without the hotheaded sire of the flight leading the military wing.

"No, we won't. Should we find him, we will take up arms at his side."

"And if you do not?"

She faltered. "We will think of something."

"Whatever suits you best, then." Rising to his feet, Kelan strode across the mountain clearing and down a winding path beyond it, not bothering to look back at the small flight of flarions who watched him go, more than a little offended that he didn't bother to beg them to stay.

And why should he? If they couldn't trust him, pleading with them wouldn't win their favor, either. The prideful dragons likely already pitied him for not seeing things their way.

Pausing, he sat in the grass, leaning against a massive green stalk that rivaled the size of most trees in the area-- a titan flower, one of many that grew here in Schalle and nowhere else.
Closing his eyes, Kelan felt the wam breeze caress his cheek, heard the gentle chime of faesong carried down from the giant flower's petals, sensed the gentle rumble of tiny creatures burrowing beneath the dirt, moles and worms and insects.

The Flarion had been a doomed flight from the start, a fate he knew he may have unwittingly imposed upon them. Valdren had been right-- he had taken him away from Opus too soon out of his fear of the great crystal that seemed to corrupt so many things it came into contact with.

He must've felt that emptiness forever, letting it fester, quietly loathing his father even as he did as he was told and often as he wasn't in an attempt to win his favor-- favor Valdren had always possessed. Had he perhaps failed to make that clear? Perhaps; perhaps his absent neglect for the young dragon had inspired the wrath and vengeance that all Flarion were so well-known for, instead of the patience and serene grace he had hoped to teach.

Kelan sighed, slow and deep, his ears falling flat. He couldn'tve been completely wrong, though... knowing what Opus had been like, once, ages ago when she made her way through the world with the three of them, when the stone was still small enough to be carried within her talons.
Marquise and Lyric'Ai both seemed unharmed by their time with the Mirajin-- or at least, from what he could tell from his very occasional encounters with them.

But *Opus*...

A sudden, great gust of wind pulled Kelan from his thoughts; opening his eyes, he watched Aqk perch upon a nearby tree and gaze down upon him, clicking her talons nervously.

"You must come with me; I've found an old friend. *Now!*"

Book II Chapter 27: The Blink of a God's Eye

The Glade of Kings, Chimre

"*...by the elements*, what's happened to you?"

The great eagle sat upon a tree branch in a warped forest; the trees cried out in confusion, in agony, pleading for a release from the alien torment they suffered.

She had flown over this place several times recently; each time, these voices tugged at her heart, and each time she had to offer them promises she wasn't certain she could keep.

We will heal you soon. Everything will be as it once was again.

This was a special sort of grief for her, grieving for a wounded ecosystem, all twisted and gnarled and mutated and *wrong*.

But that was business; even *that* was a different pain compared to seeing an old companion, an old *consort* in ruin and despair, and so Aqk gazed with pity down upon the bloated beast that lay below her.

Ironically, his voice was still the same as it had always been, clear and soothing like a silver bell; something about it sent chills down Kelan's spine, even as he held on to Aqk's feathers for dear life.

"You all have reasons to carry on like nothing ever changed. *I*... was not so lucky."

He was easily as large as Sasha, and had likely been beautiful once; a lion, white fur matted and dirty gray, his blue eyes reddened with self-pity, his paws and muzzle stained with man-made foods likely ill-gotten.

He huddled in the trees and tall grass to hide himself from view, though it did little to mask the poor shape the great cat was in.

"You could have found *something*, Dietri--"

"You're one to speak of finding things, Aqk! We're immortal, but it's not like the little ones like to say. Years don't pass in the blink of an eye for us; they drag on, on and on and on, just like for them. What kept you from trying to find me? Was I so forgettable once our masters had faded away?!"
Dietrich bared his massive teeth, though it was clearly a bluff. Kelan noticed the exhaustion in his eyes, the way he kept his head low like a beast in eternal submission.

"Stop that," Aqk rumbled, wounded. "I'm here now. What have you been doing all this time? Where have the griffins--"

"I tired of them ages ago," the lion sighed, covering his muzzle with his paws as if preparing for slumber. "I've no use for the company of beasts any longer. Go off to the place the man-kin call Liasse if you're so eager to see them; they fetched a lovely price from the magi." He rolled onto his side dismissively, his tail thumping against one of his flabby thighs.

But the eagle was having none of this. Furious beyond sense, she threw herself into the air, swooping over to swat at him with her talons, causing Kelan to bury himself against her feathers to stay on.

"You worthless, revolting pile of rubbish! You sold off our children?! To MORTALS?!"

Dietrich was not expecting the attack. Taking the swipe across his shoulders, he got to his feet with a thunderous bellow, shuffling off into the deeper wood.

"Selfish harpy! You should have come and gotten them by now if you were so concerned!" he roared before vanishing into the dark.

"He was such a noble thing once," Aqk lamented with more than a little pity and anger, perching to ensure the poor jostled elf was safe before taking wing once more.

Book II Chapter 28: Cover

The Academy of Arcana
Lassenbhurg, Liasse

"Sir, thank you for visiting. If you could sign in at the tome over there, we'll have someone with you shortly. Are you here for a class or an arcane service?"

"I'd like to speak to the head of your fine institution, sir, if you could arrange such a thing on such short notice."

"Ah... I'm afraid I can't allow you up there without clearance. In the meantime, if you'd like to--"

The mage on secretary duty within the Academy Grand Hall today was a balding fellow with kind eyes and a pair of half-moon spectacles perched atop his nose; the archetypal good old wizard if ever there was one. His strange, scaly visitor had coaxed his fluffy brow into a suspicious frown, however.
The creature was fascinating, no doubt (silisk and slithr weren't terribly uncommon around these parts, though the latter were rarely found anywhere beyond Lassenbhurg's walls-- but this fellow was something different altogether!), but a five-headed, rainbow-colored hydra with wings and a fondness for singing one-man operas wasn't even *quite fascinating enough* to merit a visit with the Grand Magus *unannounced!*

Seamus was just about to continue cycling through his script for these sorts of situations when the odd lizardman abruptly slipped a satchel out of his toga and began to open it.

Fantastic, the old mage thought, his heart sinking. *This is the part where they try to kill me to get by, and I wind up in a physician's care for the fifth time this season!*

What the creature did next, however, might've merely sent him to hospital on account of a heart-attack.

Carefully, painstakingly, it removed a book from the satchel, setting it gently upon the counter, though not daring to take its clawed hands away from its age-worn, worm-eaten leather cover.
Seamus could read the text's cover quite well regardless, and his eyes grew as if attempting to pop from his head.

"What is... *What?!...how did you come across such a thing?! Where?! This cannot be genuine. You...you must--"*

"... speak with your employer and let him know I would like to see him. Please, good sir," the scaly thing asked again, his voice smooth and dry. "All of us pursue some order of greater knowledge. I know things that your institution would find worth hearing, just as you know things that I would very much like to learn. A relationship between us could prove beneficial for everyone."

"W..we'll fit you in," Seamus gasped, staring in disbelief at the old, musty tome written in Ancient Aengoch.

Aensdounne; A Thorough and Unabridged Accounte of its Tribes and Goddes.
Lorde Dylndrouue Ba'Sylle

Book II Chapter 29: Reunion

The Grand Library
Jetersborough, South Dreamsong

Marquise's desk was covered in stacks of paperwork, neglected and untouched; her mind had been elsewhere for some time now, and she couldn't find the proper state of mind to get back to a normal day's work-- something that had never been a problem for her.

Lost in her thoughts, the commanding knock that sounded from her office door caught her off-guard.

"Come in."

The door swung open almost at once, and her brother-- the *blonde* brother, until recently not prone to wandering beyond the borders of Schalle-- stepped wordlessly in before shutting the door carefully behind him.
Clothed in worn leather and furs studded with wooden and clay beads, feathers and bone, vines twined through his unkempt hair and over one side of his face, curled into intricate designs against his skin. Butterflies, moths, and beetles seemed to make themselves at home in pouches and bags tied securely over his shoulders and around his belt, making the disguised flarion seem an eccentric woodsman who had somehow managed to harbor his own little ecosystem.

His golden eyes carefully scanned the room before falling upon Marquise, who met them with more than a little surprise; here was the brother who never dropped by for visits, at least not without very good reason.

"...Marquise." Carefully, fondly spoken, it was as much a greeting as a question.

"*Valdren?* What brings *you* here?"

"Soul-searching, you could say."

Frowning, Marquise got to her feet, slipping around her desk to stand by Valdren, reaching to gently stroke his hair, careful to avoid disturbing a small anole perched atop one of his ears. "What's on your mind?"
He took a slow breath, sucking briefly upon his lip and closing his eyes.

It had been some time-- several months, easily-- since the flarion prince's last contact with family, or anyone for that matter. His appearance in Chimre no doubt had turned a few heads by now, but he made certain that no one knew where he was at any point in time.

He had needed his solitude, and the care of the wild lands, in order to clear his head.
Now, he needed the advice of someone unbiased.

Someone like his little sister.

"...When you've lived your entire life in black and white, only to suddenly realize that there's more to the world than that... where do you go? How do you start over?" His voice was tinged with old pain, emotions he did not dare reveal before now.

"You decide how you feel about things, and make your decisions based on that," Marquise said. "So there's more to the world than what you thought - does it change how you look at it? How you think about it?"

Slowly, a vine curled around Valdren's arm, a tiny bud bursting into bloom as it crept ever upward.

"I'm still not sure how to make sense of it yet," Valdren admitted. "I've been thinking, ever since...well, I've been thinking for a *long while*. I traveled here from Laps-- I'm not a Firestarter anymore. I'm done with that."

"Oh, sweetheart." Marquise sighed softly, still stroking through his hair. "Tell me what happened, hmm?"
This was easily the most she had heard from Valdren in centuries; by far the most reserved of the three siblings, he rarely said a word unless some sudden burst of raw emotion spurred it in him. He was clearly far from violent now; *something significant* had happened, something that may well have changed him...

"I grew tired of following Kelan around, doing his dirty work for him and watching him balk at it. So, I left... *months* ago, figuring I'd take matters into my own hands. Except I managed to end up in Chimre. I paid our Mother a visit. I saw the Mirajin, face to facet. I've been wandering the continent ever since, searching for answers, or at least new questions to consider."

Marquise nodded, though she already knew half the story - the Courtesans in charge of her mother had already informed her of Valdren's visit. "...And have you found any?"

"More questions than I can count. I'll find answers for them in time...preferably *sooner* rather than later." He frowned. "What of you, though? There was a look in your eye when I came in."

Marquise paused with a soft sigh; she truly had been out of sorts lately to have given anything away in her expression-- or perhaps Valdren was just particularly observant.
"Things have been... *stressful*, these past few days. All internal affairs, but... it's troubling." With that, she moved to return to her seat once more, giving nothing away.

As head of the Court, Marquise's hesitance to disclose information was rarely a surprise to any member of her family-- even Nefirian himself was an open book compared to her tight-lipped approach on any infomation she deemed worth keeping.
Valdren kept his gaze upon her, however-- *this* was a different situation.

"Nothing you can't handle, I pray? The Court has never been prone to make mistakes," Valdren mused, absently watching a large, colorful moth alight upon his hand.

"The Court has never dealt with such a thing before. We..." she fell silent, hesitant.

"Ah, you've already said too much, haven't you? It won't reach anyone's ears from me, I swear it."

"...I've never had any reason not to trust you, brother. I'm sorry, it's rude of me to keep it from you," she sighed, relenting, her expression lost, uncertain. "A few days ago, we lost a Courtesan. She just... *disappeared*."

"Disappeared," Valdren gasped, incredulous. "That's... well, what sort of force would be capable of such a thing?"

"Any number of things could have happened. Her charges are gone too." She turned her gaze downward. " I felt her life... go out. Just like *that*. It's... it's hard to describe."

"We'll find what's responsible," Valdren promised.

"I already have Erosions out there, searching. ...I doubt it'll be an isolated incident."

They gazed at one another in solemn silence, brother and sister reunited for one brief moment. Leaning over the desk, Valdren reached to stroke her cheek.

"It's been a long time since I've seen this side of you," Marquise smiled.

"I've wronged and neglected you far too many times. I hope I can even *begin* to make up for that."

"Shh," she said. "You've always done what you thought was right. I can't slight you for that."

Valdren smiled sadly, brushing hair and living vines away from his face. "You were always the graceful one."

"And you were always the affirmative one. Don't look so sad, sweetie."

"It's difficult," Valdren admitted, shaking his head. "I... still love my father, but I don't regret the things I said to him. It's not easy for me to come to terms with..." he fell silent, frowning.

"To come to terms with what?"

The prince swallowed, knowing his next words would likely... still, saying it would cement it within his mind, ensure his action and dedication where his father had failed to do so.
"It's not easy for me to come to terms with the very real possibility that I may be forced to declare war against Kelan in the near future."

Marquise blinked, more than a little shocked. "...That's not something to say lightly, Valdren. You know what happened the last time the *Chapters* got involved in a dispute, and they--"

"I remember all too well, sister. And yet... he was given a charge of the utmost importance, and he has failed to see to it. Schalle is secure, but Schalle is *not enough*, and for all of his preaching and communion with the wilds and insisting he knew what was *best*... well, it is complicated."

"Just... don't do anything rash. I'd hate to be the one to sign off on the order to neutralise my own brother." As the great balancers of the world, it fell upon the Court to ensure any outstanding situations that threatened to sway favor too far in any direction were *dealt* with.

This was done with frightening accuracy and no remorse-- *regardless* of the identity of the targets in question.

"I'd rather it not come to that at all... but I will tread lightly, where I can. Time is running out, and had Kelan acted years ago, the circumstances and necessary solutions wouldnt've been so dire," he said, turning to eye the window. "Don't worry, though-- I'm still myself," Valdren insisted, managing a faint grin over a shoulder.

"Then... don't go doing anything that'd make our mother sad, okay?" she said, knowing the invocation would strike an instant chord with her brother.

It didn't have quite the anticipated effect, however; Valdren suddenly smiled, a strange, dangerous fire in his eyes. "There's no need to worry. I'm acting upon her suggestions, after all..."

"...You *are?"*

"Oh, yes," Valdren purred, quite certain of himself. "She said she thought it was time someone took measures to properly see to the well-being of the natural world..."

Now Marquise was on edge; unnerved, she watched him closely. "...When did she say this, Valdren?"

He paused. "...why, not three days ago."

"...I see."

"Why, is something the matter?" A tiny bird wriggled its way out of his hair, chirping furiously before darting for the cracked window.

"No, dearheart," Marquise insisted. "Everything's fine. I'm glad you came to talk to me today, I've missed you over the years."

"And I you, little sister. Perhaps with a bit of good fortune, I'll be able to come see you more often."

"I hope so. You know my door's always open."

"I'm glad to know it-- thank you, Marky."

Valdren stood, slipping around to embrace her gently, warmly, pecking her cheek before heading for the door. "If you should need me, send for an hawk-owl. It will know how and where to find me."

"Oh, I'm sure I'll find you," she insisted with a smile.

"The world is changing, little sister. Be ready for anything. There's just no telling what's out there, or what will come next," he said, slipping away through the office door with a rustle of leaves.
Marquise's eyes never left him.

"It only changes if we let it, brother," she whispered.

Book II Chapter 30: The Little Rajiin

Rajiin Sadinha's Throne-Chamber
The Soril Underpass, Lucsus

"Rajiin, we have a problem."

"Ah?"

The tunnels were bustling, as they always were, with merchants and consumers making their various ways through the Soril Underpass-- a complex network of underground roads spanning almost the entire length of Lucsus, at the heart of which was Soril City itself.
The Underpass was legendary, said to boast a swift and sure path anywhere on the continent as well as providing free stall space to any merchant with goods to sell, rendering itself a massive market in its own right (though the rarest items were to be found within the city-- everyone knew hawking anything too valuable in the Pass would simply win you a good mugging, and hell if the guards would do a thing about it).

Being what it was, there was *always* someone coming or going, on foot or drake or leading a train of well-loaded sand-cavies, the chimaeras' preferred beast of burden.

Of course, once you left for the open sands above, you were on your own unless you'd hired a professional guide, and even then, there were *certain hazards*.

So what the approaching guard said next did not surprise Rajiin Sadinha in the least.

"An entourage was lost out in the sandsea recently; they haven't been seen or heard of for some time."

"And you mean to trouble me with such a triviality? Surely there's something more to it than that."

Rajiin Sadinha Marvaa was the current living decendant of the chimaera responsible for the creation of the Soril Underpass at a time when living on the harsh sands of Lucsus was a constant struggle for survival. She herself was little like her ancestor, however; where he had been a massive, golden chimaera with a mane full of straight horns like a porcupine's quills, her scales were many shades of brilliant violet, her horns numbering only four-- two long and spiraling, two short and straight.

But most of all, *Rajiin Sadinha Marvaa*-- the equivalent of a Queen to other cultures-- was very, *very small*.

She was most definitely *old enough* to rule the Pass, and did so with wisdom and patience and the keen financial sense that all chimaera valued.
But shortly after her third year of life, her body had simply lost interest in growing any longer, and so she watched in silent embarrassment as her playmates came to tower over her.
Sadinha began to shield her eyes with flowers crafted of silk and jewels, a way to mask the fury and hatred she often felt when others treated her as though she were a child or a toy; she knew well how to keep her tongue in check, but the eyes were always eager to give everything away.

Now, she kept a perch atop a great quartz crystal within the tunnels, and it was from this perch that she glowered down upon her pestering guard.

"Yes, Rajiin. The Courtesan was among those lost," he admitted, bowing his head.

"What?! NO!" Her shrill cry echoed across the cavern walls. "The Lady is no fool! Who was she sent with, a group of idiots who didn't have enough sense to travel properly? Send for my lodica at once!"

The little Rajiin paced upon the crystal, cringing. The erosion had not been with them for long yet; still growing accustomed to the Luxi way of life, she could not have known any better than the chimaera who had been assigned to accompany her.
The Grand Rajii would have given the travel order-- but the entourage's failure would undoubtedly fall upon *her* shoulders.

A guard rushed forward, carrying a tiny golden lodica in the shape of a jeweled scarab upon a silk cushion. Passing it up to other guards perched farther up the crystal throne, it was finally sat before Sadinha, who batted at the recording button with a little paw.

"Lady Marquise-- I, Rajiin Sadinha, must regretfully report that we've received word that an entourage accompanying your recently assigned Courtesan has gone missing in the sands above the Soril Underpass System. We suspect the involvement of *Amol*, and will be sending out search parties for evidence. We welcome any assistance you might lend with open arms, and await your swift reply."

With a heavy sigh and a shake of the head that sent her lop-ears wagging furiously, she gave the false insect a final swat; with a mechanical beep, it lifted its carapace and spread its luminous violet wings, beating them furiously before darting off into the tunnel's gloom.

"Years and years and years and *years*. Have we devised no way to exterminate these vermin once and for all yet?!" the little Rajiin demanded furiously.

Book II Chapter 31: The Dangerous Desert

Desert travel is treacherous, even to those as well-suited to it as the chimaera of Lucsus.
Even they cannot withstand the scorching heat and relentless sands for long, and as any chimaera knows, dangerous things lurk just beneath the flowing seas of sand, waiting to devour any foolish enough to linger.

Land-drakes and horses may suffice... *for fools waiting to be sucked into the sands and slaughtered, perhaps*, but the chimaera know better-- and that is why the chimaera prize the sand-cavy as one of their culture's greatest treasures.

Intelligent, powerful, friendly, and able to scurry deftly across the sands and out of harm's way, even when weighed down with valuable goods, sand-cavies (or desert pigs, as the *uncultured people of the eastern world* may call them) are the only choice for any chimaera merchant or nomad making their way out into the sands for any great length of time.

It doesn't hurt to have a soft, warm companion to curl up with in the Pass, either.

Book II Chapter 32: Breaking News!

BREAKING NEWS
The Soril Sun - Soril City, Lucsus
Auguste 11, 2009

Several oil-scouting parties were killed in the Al-Exa Dunesea yesterday afternoon after attempting to drill for oil, sources say.

Many companies have made the trek out into the treacherous sands in the hopes of being the first to uncover a large supply of crude oil, which researchers and scientists are beginning to believe could provide a new power source more efficient and safer than the controversial miracrystal power that dominates the world market today.

No one has yet succeeded-- largely due to mysterious attacks that "come from beneath the sands," one Luxi Sand-Guide said.

"It is the *Amol*, without a doubt in my mind," she added. "They have long struck at those foolish enough to travel on foot through the sands, sometimes pursuing their victims for miles. But we have never seen them as relentless as they have been of late. It is an ill omen."

This comes after a simple travelling entourage allegedly contaning only civilian Luxi guides and a Court representative went missing in the same area days ago.

Would-be drillers are urged by Grand Rajii Dalnak to cease operations and avoid travel within the Duneseas at all costs as the Luxi Guard assess the situation.

Book II Chapter 33: Fair Trade

Everyone knows that the chimaera are the kings of trade-- not everyone can say exactly what it is they distribute.

The Luxi Tiger-Gecko is the most popular reptilian pet in the world, imported straight from the sands of Lucsus from Soril City. Docile, hardy, and with a wide range of patterns and colors, they are kept by owners of all ages and kinds.

They also turn over a profit of more than three billion krus a year for the trappers, dealers, and breeders of Soril-- a sweet deal all around, in other words.

Book II Chapter 34: Change on the Horizon

Flames and golden sunlight have been seen flickering throughout the sky at all hours of day as of late.

The lucky-- or perhaps, unlucky-- catch glimpses of massive, leathery wings the color of molten metal cutting through the air, through clouds or over nearby woodland.

Older citizens know what flarion on the move usually mean, and usher their children indoors, with lies of rare birds or strange zeppelins on their tongues.

Historians, archivists and researchers know, as well, and the omen such sightings represent has not gone unrecorded in their notebooks.

The unfortunate truth, however, is that no one knows for certain just what is brewing now.
And worse still?

For the first time in history, *Kelan Flarion himself does not know, either*.

Book II Chapter 35: From the Ashes

Vales-Temps, Chimre

"Valadreni! Wyre Valadreni!"

Casarilinia winged her way over the ruined landscape with her brothers and sisters in tow, her heart aching at the sight of what must have been ancient trees twisted and mutated into ghastly, crystalline objects mere shadows of their former selves.

The Flarions behind her gasped and snapped their jaws in distaste-- if only they had tried to save this place *long ago!* It was likely nothing could be salvaged here, which made them question their leader's decision, in turn.

Why would the wandering prince have come to a place like this and left it unscathed?

But Lady Casarilinia had served the Firestarters for an age as an expert tracker-- far more skilled than any mortal could dream, capable of finding anyone over air or even sea by tracing their very *essence*-- and she had no reason to doubt her abilities now.

"We press on! He *was* here, and we *will* find him!" She bellowed, her powerful voice sending a tremble through the crystal-studded canopy below.
Searching out a clearing, the flarion tucked her wings in at her sides, diving down to land and continue on by foot. Satisfied that the other dragons followed suit, she lifted her great head, at once staring in horror at the surreal, ethereal scene unfolding before them.

"Look at this," Casarilinia gasped, reaching with a talon to snap a branch away from a tree. "Not a trace of vitality left in this.. and yet, they sway in the wind, they flower and grow leaf, they *seed*! This is..."

"Milady!" a younger flarion gasped, gesturing with his head to a small group of leupaks eyeing them warily from beneath the trees.

"One of the first things we do," the old female rumbled, narrowing her eyes and lowering her great head, "Is to purify *this place."*

"Why not start now?" the younger whispered to her, moving slowly to stand by her side.

"Why not, indeed."

The smell of charred flesh and smoke stung Dietrich's nose, rousing him from his nap. Wrinkling his muzzle, he snorted, lifting his head and slowly opening his eyes.

"...what in...?"

These forests had been his home for longer than he could now remember, and in all honesty, he remembered his time here with greater clarity than his years of service; they seemed a fleeting dream now, something he had made up to pass the time between waiting, and waiting, and having a bite to eat, being groomed by his loyal subjects so graciously sent in from the nearby cities, or squashing some unwelcome tresspasser (described by the very same subjects so that he might know who would give them trouble-- and thus jeopardize his regular meals) between his big paws.

As the wood had long since turned to crystal, fires were not something he saw in this land of eerie, almost alien beauty.

Nevertheless... *something* had managed to set the trees aflame not far from his bed, and they blazed with a brilliance that nearly blinded him.

Rising to his feet, Dietrich made his way deeper into the forest to find the source, paying no mind to the tiny lizard-creatures galloping past him, shrieking in terror in their strange, flowery language.

"Flari! Exodei, *Flari!"*

This word, he had been taught by his servants; it explained the inferno, but raised new questions. He picked up his pace, drawing in a breath and bellowing to warn any around of his approach.

"You would torch *MY* lands, whelps?! I'll have your heads!"

The Flarions, already startled by the sudden shout echoing through the trees, were ill-prepared for the gigantic white lion that came soaring out of the nearby clearing in a rage.
Golden wings snapped open, scales glinting in the firelight as dragons took wing, as much to size up the new arrivel as out of fear.

No less a great cat than he ever was, Dietrich's initial pounce had struck true; he crushed his jaws down around the throat of the little flarion he'd snatched up just as it turned to flee, proudly shaking the twitching corpse to display it to the rest of the flock.

"You have no place here! The first that came through was given a reprieve, but you..." Dietrich glowered, his eyes reflecting all of the heat and light of the fires dying down before him. "*Begone*, before I drown you in your own damn ash!"

Casarilinia hovered far above, watching the beast with her sharp eyes. "We're here searching out our own, swine, and once we have him, we'll deal with you in turn! Come, all of you. We're finished here!"
At once, the group of dragons hissed and spat, swooping away into the distance before the lion could think to leap at them.

Dietrich growled with an irritable flick of his tailtip, stomping out the last of the flames with his paw.

In the ash, tiny green buds and flowers had miraculously begun to sprout and curl from the scorched earth and remains of some of the little lizard-beasts, pulsing with new life.

"...how peculiar," he breathed.

Book II Chapter 36: Time is Ticking

Cathedral of a Thousand Roses
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Dr. Nefirian Dreamscar was in a bit of a mood.

The Anshedoctor sat before a grand window, his eyes glued to the newspaper he held within his clawed fingertips.
Curling his lip, he snorted derisively.
"Fool chimaera. *Fools*, every last one of them! Oil will prove useful, but what is the purpose in throwing so many lives away to get at it? Neutralize the danger first... what is the Rajii thinking?"

A sudden rapping upon his door drew his attention; still lost in his irritation, he barked a swift "in, in!" before returning to the news. The sound of soft, padded feet thudding heavily across the parlor floor caught his ear.

His *Cronois* were a House of guardian leupaks of the highest order; they served as a sturdy and efficient police force throughout Laps and the surrounding areas, in addition to his palace and grounds.
Resembling powerfully-built golems made of bronze and steel with faces like clocks, they were surprisingly more swift and flexible than appearances would have one believe-- the beauty of leupaks as servants was that they were horrendously versatile in both form and function.

For the most part, however, they stuck to observing the populace, ensuring no suspicious persons entered his home, and doing the usual patrol routine.

One coming to give him a personal report meant *something was going on.*

Scowling, he folded his newspaper and sat it atop his great belly. "You have news, Aranthrates?"

"Yes, milord." The leupak's voice was deep and resonating, like a brass bell. *"We've recieved reports of a forest fire northeast of here, in Vales-Temps. The Lion also adds that he has the body of a Flarion that he managed to snatch and kill before the flock escaped."*

The room fell instantly, utterly, *torturously* silent; perhaps if a tiny spider had crept across the wall at that very instant, its footsteps would've echoed like giant's feet.

"Ready my rapier and my carriage, and send the Silvermanes to patrol Vales-Temps in its entirety, please," he spoke at last, after taking a slow, deep breath and closing his eyes.

"At once, milord."

This could mean several things, without a doubt-- *none of them* were scenarios he favored.

He adjusted his monocle before peeling himself out of his plush chair and onto his feet with a soft, serpentine hiss, leaving the room with Cronois Aranthrates in tow, the hands of the metallic leupak's face slowly *tick-tick-ticking* away as the seconds passed.

Yes, Dr. Nefirian Dreamscar was in a *very foul mood*, and it wasn't going to get any better any time soon.

Book II Chapter 37: New Management

The Limbo Peninsula, Chimre

Casarilinia dove in for a landing, tucking her old, leathery wings in against her back as she ducked though the low branches and into the wood.
The trees here were borderline mutants, she noted; the edges of their leaves had begun to crystallize, but the majority were still green and relatively fertile, the branches more or less straight and smooth.

"...Valadreni?" She felt more than saw him in the shade of the trees, in his elven form that more resembled one of the ancient *dryad*; leaning against a particularly large trunk, his arms folded across his chest and his face all but buried in his fur cape.

"Do you think my owls have gone blind, *Wyra Casarilinia?*" His voice was low, a warning tone, and still her name rolled over his tongue like a thick syrup.

Wyra-- or, alternately, *Wyre*-- was an honorary term among their kind, reserved for the most ancient of the flight, the wyrms. Casari was not one of the first flarion by any stretch, instead part of one of the eigth or ninth generations.

She was still very old, and one of the more powerful.

That did not, however, mean Valdren was remotely frightened of her. Swiftly, he gave her a blow to the snout with the back of the hand, not nearly enough to hurt her in this form, but enough to humiliate.

"...my lord?!" Casari was aghast. "What have I--"

"You know damn well what you've done! To think... setting a forest aflame in Chimre, drawing Nefirian's attention and then swooping off to find me! Explain why I shouldn't water these plants with your lifeblood for the trouble you've undoubtedly brought down upon our heads?"

"Trouble?! I was only beginning what we will surely finish in time, milord!" The angry dragon whipped her fanlike tail, the others in the flock backing away lest they recieve a nasty lash. "This land--"

"Will be left until *later*." Rising from the tree, Valdren began to pace. "I absolutely welcome any and all dragons who would follow me-- but such stupidity must die here, *now*, or I will turn you in to the Rose myself! Now, all of you, LISTEN!"

The thunderous voice that rose from the throat of the tiny elf was deafening, and every dragon there sat at attention, their eyes wide.

"First things first... should you follow me, know that you are from this point forward denouncing your former status as a member of the Firestarters. I will be leading this thing, but not as the Valdren who once led that doomed operation. I'll be doing this on my terms, as I see fit, and you'll be answering to my authority at all times. Which means *I'd better not see anyone trying to play vigilante*, and I mean it."
Valdren narrowed his eyes, scratching the tuft of white hair against his cheek.
"Should you decide you don't like the way I play, you will be free to go home to Kelan. But other than that... I'll take care of you, and we will see to it that Valenth is restored to what it *aught* to be. No nonsense, no random violence, no attacking anyone or anything without my clear orders to do so, *understood?*"

"Yes, milord," they all chorused. Something had definitely changed in Kelan Flarion's heir-- but what, none of them were certain.
Casari eyed him with interest, her crest held high.

"If I may be so bold, *Wyre Valadreni*... are we not planning to strike against the Rose?" she crooned.

"Not yet, no," he said softly, reaching to gently stroke the snout of the dragon he had struck just moments before. "There are preparations to be made before we can even entertain such a thought; unfortunately, at the moment it'll be imperative that we lead them to feel that we're no threat to them. Information needs to be gathered, research needs to be done on just what we'd be up against."

The flarion Prince shut his eyes and bowed his head, wings sprouting from his back and spreading to blot out what light had found its way through the thick canopy.

"For now," Valdren said through sharp teeth, "our first target will be one we know exceedingly well..."

Book II Chapter 38: Exposure

The Forum of All Souls
Valley Circle, North Dreamsong

"It wasn't us."

"What in the name of Hel do you mean, it *wasn't you?* There was a dead *flarion* on my doorstep. My forest was *aflame*, Kelan-- crystal forests don't have *wildfires!* Flarion fire is to blame, nothing else could do such a thing!"

"Will you please--"

"What? Will I please *what*, Kelan? I'm listening."

The Forum of All Souls was a grand colloseum ofhumandesign, once a hotspot of bustling activity in the early years of their civilization. Now worn by the ravages of time, age and disrepair, it was still an impressive piece of architecture, though one few people saw anymore.

It made for a convenient place of private discussion for the two chapters which now paced within the great stone circle that made its floor. Even when tensions rose with voices, the winds had been magically coaxed to now sweep words away instead of carrying them, dashing them to nothing before they could ever reach the ears of any creature hidden behind the walls.

"Nef, afterValdrenleft, more than half of my dragons went after him. I can only account for those who have remained with me, and *they* still adhere to the old rules. They'd never set foot in Chimre uninvited, let *alone*..."

The fat little *Anshe* narrowed his eyes, removing his monocle to polish it. "So you mean to tell me there's no less than a full *flight* of rogue flarion that could be anywhere as we speak? Possibly led by Valdren?"

Well, *shit*. Things were getting interesting, now.

Exasperated, Kelan nodded. "I'd like to think he'd be wiser than to tempt your hand, though."

"He is," Nef agreed. "I spoke to... an accomplice who witnessed the entire scene, and Valdren wasn't with the group at all. They were led by an old female, apparently; I imagine it was her idea, not least of all because Valdren recently came through to visit Opus."

Kelan's eyes became dinnerplates. "...*What?!* He... he can't just *stroll in* and have a chat with her by the Mirajin! Nefirian, what were you thinking?!"

"What was *I* thinking? That the boy had every right to spend time with his mother, that's what! Would you still deny him that now?" Nef gritted his teeth-- he still cared for Kelan, but now more than ever he sorely wished to shake him at times.

"It's not about denying him, a man of such... *supposed* scientific prowess as yourself aught to know as much!" The words immediately set Nefirian on edge; he glowered furiously at the blonde, but Kelan continued undaunted. "Valdren was never exposed to the Mirajin like Marquise and Lyric'Ai were. There's no telling what direct, point-blank exposure might've done to him, especially in his current mental state! I taught him to shield against brief, moderate exposure, not... *not...*"

"He's going to be *fine*, Kelan," Nefirian lied tersely, but the ranger-knight saw the truth in his old friend's eyes.

With a soft snort that revealed only the tip of his anger, Kelan Flarion wrapped his cloak around his shoulders. His elven guise melted away, becoming sleek, feathered, avian.
Spreading his golden wings, Kelan took flight, circling over Nefirian's head once before gliding away into the trees.

"Pray, for your own sake," he crowed, "that he will."

Book II Chapter 39: Correspondance

Within a courier's mailbag, hung from his hip as he rides to deliver...

Where do I begin?
I've always strived to learn about anything I could, just for the sake of knowing; even better if I could pass that knowledge on to someone else. It's my nature as much as my passion; you know that as much as anyone.

But... well, something has changed recently. Not in me, but in...

By Kelan, I'm sorry. I can't tell you like this. You'll know soon, I promise, but not like this.

It's been eating me up inside, though. I've known sadness; grandpa dying still hasn't stopped stinging completely, yet, and it's been years.

No one's died, but I've... I've never felt so angry before. And I don't even know where to direct it!
I don't know what to do.

I really need your help; I'll be home in a few days, and then I'll tell you everything.

Hastily folded in an unopened, plain white envelope. No name or address supplied...

Happy birthday, angel. I know you fret about your age, and the lines and wrinkles that aren't there, but if it's possible, you look more radiant than ever. There's a glow about you that I haven't seen since that business with your pa, and it's nice to see you smile again. This is gonna be damn corny, I know. Don't laugh.

I can hear you downstairs right now, the life and soul of the party. I know the cigarette case I got you isn't as fancy as the stuff you're used to, but you always complain about asking other people. Have you seen the prices of those new Lodicas? I can't afford that!

Anyway. By Opus, I'm drunk.

I love you. I love your laugh, and your smile, and your hair and your voice and your hands and your lips and your eyes and your voice and everything about you. I've spent my whole life with you, and I can't imagine you not being there. You're the reason I do this, every day, and we'll get that nice place in the hills, and raise talstags like your great great uncle or grandpa or whichever did. You're perfect.

I wish I could tell you.

Tied upon a hawk's leg, held out as its recipient carefully removes the tiny canister the note is contained within...

I don't know why I was given this burden; I sorely wish I did, so I might have some insight into how I should go about dealing with it.

I've not only failed thus far in finding a way to reverse the planet's ails, but I have also inspired my own son to choose a destructive path in the hopes of greater success.

I cannot blame him for the results of my own mistakes, but I fear the cost will be high, and the currency will be no less than the lives of the innocent.

I am already aware, to some small extent, of what will come to pass; that is part of the load I bear. It is all I can do to face it with my head held high, and trust that what will come to pass will be for the greater good of all.

I don't know what will become of me as a result of all this; I cannot bear to lie to you.

All I can do is hope that I might gaze upon your honest, open face one more time before the sky begins to burn.

Be safe, I beg of you.

Tucked carefully away within a keepsake box...

What is a mischevious faery without his better half? This is the trouble I face now, with you so very far away from home.
It's a strange situation; normally I wander about on business and you remain. I suppose I have no right to complain, then, do I?

(On second thought, you whine and complain constantly*, so perhaps I owe you.)*

I do hope you're taking proper care of yourself. I can't lie; we've been living in the lap of luxury for too many years to comfortably return to our roots, I think. Who will cook for you? Sasha's not going to make you any soup.
Who will clean up after your drunken, drug-addled romps through the for--

Oh, wait. I've *forgotten*; you'll have no booze, and you've no knowledge of what any of the herbs I so painstakingly prepare for you look like in their natural form.

Well, damn. I can expect you back soon, then, can't I?
Don't linger; your poor monster is lonely, and undoubtedly *wasting away in despair*.

Pinned to a corkboard attached to the wall of a makeup room, partially covered by photos, programs and other various scraps of paper...

Everyone loves you. The cheers, the excited screams and whistles, the adoring fans lining up to hear you sing and play, paying astonishing amounts of money for the privelege of speaking to you, shaking your hand, securing a coveted autograph.
And who couldn't? You are the bard, the voice of the ever-changing world of entertainment, always glamourous, always stunning, ever with the perfect words on your silver tongue and a smart curve of the corner of your mouth.

Always, they fuss and gossip and fantasize about you; perhaps *they'll* be the one to win your heart, perhaps if they show up in the right place at the right time, you'll stumble into their arms and fall head over heels for them.

Not one of them stops to think that, perhaps, who they see is merely a front, a show, part of the business. Not one of them thinks that perhaps there's more to you than the voice and the songs, the smirk and the dance and the feathered corset.

I don't ever want this masquerade with you to come to an end. You, a living fantasy... me, a shy and beautiful *girl*.

Hah. It's so freakin' perfect!

Book II Chapter 40: Here With Me

The Limbo Peninsula, Chimre

Silver rain fell, covering the pseudo-crystalline forest in a sheen of glittering droplets; they collected on the fur of Valdren's cloak, on his hair and atop his delicate ears.

They had finally left him in peace, if only for a little while, and now he was free to enjoy the refreshing storm... as well as the company of one other.

"I've done as you've asked. The rest of the flight is away, making preparations and rousing more of us for the times ahead.
It won't be long, I promise. Soon, everything will be as it should be, and..."

"We're together again, my Valadreni, my little chicklet. It's a considerable start," came the soft, rumbling, vaguely crystalline voice from behind him, great, shadowy black wings stretching to block the driving rain from his already-soaked hair.

"Everything will fall into place... I believe in you," it cooed.

Book II Chapter 41: Unpleasantries

Soril Palace
Soril City, Lucsus

"Something must be done about these Amol!"

Rajiin Sadinha Marvaa sat upon the floor of the Grand Rajii's throneroom, staring far, far up at the Lord of all Lucsus in heated despair. The dwarf chimaera was disinterested in the riches strewn across the room for all to see; the ancient tapestries, the statues sculpted of pure, solid gold, the antique vases, the bits and pieces of expensive trinkets from around the world, in societies neither of them truly understood nor cared to.

This-- Soril-- was the only place that truly mattered, and as far as she was concerned, it was under severe threat.

And yet, the Grand Rajii looked down upon her with a blank face, his eyes giving away nothing. How could he show no emotion at a time like this, when their people-- good, skilled, expensive people-- were being slain like livestock and left to roast in the sands!

"Ah ...something, of course. What sort of *something* do you advise, kitten?"

Kitten!?
Beneath the giant lotus that veiled her eyes, Sadinha scowled with rage.
And yet, despite the obvious taunt, she could do nothing but answer with respect, for this was *the* Grand Rajii, the King of Kings, the richest and most powerful chimaera in all of Valenth.
Behind him, his royal guards-- seven of them, all in humanoid guise, all weighed down with not only sorilian scimitars but a rather dangerous-looking mirashard-powered rifle each (imported from either South Dreamsong or Chimre, no doubt)-- watched her with cold eyes, their tails swaying to and fro behind them like dancing cobras.

We dare you, their eyes whispered.

Cowed, she took a slow breath before turning her gaze toward the old chimaera again.

"Your highness... our people continue to venture out into the sands, as they always have and always will, about their various businesses. At first, it was merely those hunting oil who were lost... but *now*? Now, it is anyone, *anyone* they catch! We must purge the *entire desert* if we are to know peace..."

Grand Rajii Dalnak shook his head slowly. In the distance, a soft, whooshing sound came, like a gasp coming from many people at once, but he paid it no mind.

"The Luxi do what they will. We have warned them already; it is their loss if they choose not to listen, Sadinha. The temptation surely outweighs the risk for them. Should that oil prove useful, should it prove *profitable*--"

The thunderous CRACK that sounded demanded the immediate attention of both chimaera as well as the guards; The Rajiin and Grand Rajii both hurried over to one of the stone windows of the palace to gaze from it.

In the distance, in the dim light of the cavern-city, something flowed from a new crack in one of the cave walls down below, scattering amongst the ground and the fleeing, frantic civilians who were now racing towards their homes or the closest shelter they could find.

Their kiosks, carts and bags were abandoned without a moment's thought, and the strange substance broke into smaller, more distinct shapes in the dark; one flitted by beneath an overhead street-lamp, its hulking, sand-colored form unmistakable, even from such a great distance.

Behind Sadinha, the Grand Rajii closed his eyes in silence; now, he had to react!

"Here they are, Rajii! Now they have come into our city! What say you of this?"

"...impossible."

The beasts-- the amol-- swarmed through the city, surging with disinterest past the crazed civilians, making their way swiftly through the streets with single-minded resolve. Those city guards foolish enough to rise against them were swiftly dispatched; the creatures' massive claws easily split the powerful chimaera into two parts.

Sadinha watched on in horror. Lifting her head, she cried out for her personal guards, who moved from their place in the doorway to form a circle around her. A burly guard wearing a simple-patterned sash tied around his waist knelt, and Sadinha daintily climbed into his arms.

"Look at them-- they're headed for the palace! I will not stay in here to die!"

Trailing ever closer, the amol swarm rose in the distance, their eyes locked on the palace gates, their claws click-clacking as they ran on their little hind legs. They had completely ignored the people of the city, save the guards; no doubt, they intended to devour them after they had sacked the palace!

"Take me from this place *at once!*"

The Grand Rajii lifted his head at last. Lifting his arms in front of him, he shook himself once before springing to the floor on all fours, his frail humanoid form melting away into that of a scaly, leonine beast.

"Guards-- accompany me. I am certain I can handle this amicably..."

Sadinha gasped. Amicably-- with the *Amol?*
"...what...?! Your highness, *wait!"*

The amol barreled ahead like ants on the trail, stopping for no one and nothing; abandoned kiosks were overturned and trampled, the goods contained within scattered and crushed underfoot as the creatures continued on.

The palace-- their destination-- loomed in the distance. They would arrive in a matter of minutes. The city guards had learned better than to pick a fight with the beasts; they were too strong alone, and in such staggering numbers they were undefeatable by these soft, weak creatures.

Ahead, the palace gates suddenly swung open of their own accord; beyond them, a small group of chimaera approached-- led by the Grand Rajii himself.

A soft, murmuring hiss echoed throughout the swarm, and their pace increased, their target sighted.
"Your highness! You needn't do this-- please, wait!"

Chimaera and amol drew ever-closer; the entire world seemed to have fallen silent, save the steady, marching footfall of the incoming army... And the sudden sound of *beating wings* overhead.

The amol continued on; they had no necks with which to look up with, and their backs were covered in chitinous armor. It was likely only some chimaera who thought themselves clever, trying to strike from above; they would learn their error soon enough.

The swarm slowed as they approached the palace gates; one of the creatures pulled forward, its sunken eyes on the Grand Rajii.

Lifting a huge claw, it pointed at him, its sharklike maw opening silently.

"Yes, yes... I know. I am coming."

Sadinha knew the Grand Rajii was not speaking to her, and she shuddered in revulsion.
What was going on here... and worse, what was about to unfold?

But before either could speak, a flock of erosion dragons-- five in all-- dropped from the sky to land between the amol and the chimaera ruler. One turned away from the group before its form wavered, reshaping into a hooded aeneski woman who seemed to immediately consider the scene before her.

The amol came to a complete stop, their apparent leader gnashing its teeth in distaste as the newcomers watched. "You! ... *here?* We have business. *Go away."*

"Rajii, Mr.... amol," Marquise began. "I realize that tensions have escalated recently, but I'd urge you to rethink this--"

"Stupid lizard. Your friend... tasty."
Shoving her aside effortlessly, the creature came to stand before the Grand Rajiin.
Terrified, Sadinha quietly urged her guards to back away, carefully climbing up and around her companion's shoulders to sit atop his head.

"Let's get out of here, and quick, *shadra*. He got himself into this..."
Exchanging glances, Sadinha's guards bowed their heads, changing shape and settling onto all fours. After a moment's hesitation, they slipped farther away into the palace gardens, spreading their wings and taking flight one by one to circle overhead.

"What seems to be the problem, then?" The Grand Rajii began.
The armored creature glared down at him with beady eyes. "We have agreement."

"So we do, friend-- and I have not broken the terms."

The swarm of amol seemed to twitch and shift anxiously, their dark eyes never leaving the group of dragons and chimaera before them.

"You everywhere. Drilling, digging, trespassing... *you think we are stupid?"*

Startled, the old chimaera blinked. "...of course not! Listen, if the--"

The creature turned away to regard its brethren, ignoring the old chimaera's words.
"Enough. Enough! Agreement is off," it announced simply.

As if on cue, the amol scattered, an army turned loose; armored beasts ploughed into the dark in every direction, some turning back the way they had come, others lunging at the nearest warm body they could reach. Still more burst up from the very ground, sand and stone exploding into the air.

Rajii Dalnak's guards opened fire, their energy-weapons flashing brilliant white, but for naught; the monsters were too swift. With a swing of

their powerful arms, scaly flesh was torn wide open, leaving Soril's elite in pieces, dead or dying, scrabbling in desperation to change, to survive, to *flee*.

Marquise took to the air at once, an amol's claw slashing through the air where she had stood, an elf, just moments before. Winging overhead, she watched helplessly as two of her courtesans disappeared into the sea of furious creatures, their cries of terror agonizing-- but mercifully brief.

High above the chaos, Rajiin Sadinha clung to the shoulders of her guard, her eyes wide beneath her lotus flower.

"That bastard... *no wonder he didn't want to act!"*

Below, the Grand Rajii ran for dear life, hiding within the palace gardens as the amol rampaged, searching for him, searching for more lives to snuff.

Reaching up into the flower with a paw, Sadinha took hold of her scarab lodica and began to record a message.

"I am Grand Rajiin Sadinha Marvaa. Soril City is under attack, and the outlook is grim..."

Book II Epilogue

Lassenbhurg, Liasse

Lyric hoisted his giertar over one shoulder, holding Cami close under the other arm as they rode on unicorn-back through the main street, the rest of the band following close behind.
His steed tossed her head and snorted, her ears pricked; the Lassen Guard took up the front and rear of the procession to ensure no fans broke through to do anything strange (Lyric had been particularly unamused during an incident in South Dreamsong where a bold individual had torn out a handful of his hair without so much as *paying for the privlege of touching him*; ever since, security had been stepped up to near-inpenetrable levels at every show), but the griffins the authorties rode frightened the beast.

Wild or not, griffins still eagerly dined upon creatures of the equine persuasion, and Nouveau was no fool. She watched the lion-eagle hybrids with a wary eye, careful not to take a single false step; Lyric reached a hand to soothingly stroke her head.

"Lyric, look!" Cami gestured to the people lined up on both sides of the wide boulevard, all the way up to the steps of the Rainesfaul Theatre, where they were headed to perform. The crowd had begun to murmur and whisper in hushed tones to one another-- before turning away to turn on pocket radios or rush into shops to listen inside.

"Well, what's all this, then?" Lyric frowned; reaching to hang his giertar from his saddle, he turned to his side, sliding down from Nouveau's back and striding over to the barricade lines to demand a guard's attention.

"Hey, *hey*! What's going on?"

The guard shook his head. "Bad business in Soril, sounds like. Lotta people're coming in from Lucsus to find shelter."

Shelter from what? "Well, what about our--"

"Prolly cancel it for later, lad. No telling what'll need to be done t'make accomodations." The mage-guard shook his head apologetically.

Lyric frowned, pausing to gently ruffle Cami's hair before turning on his heel and breaking into a sprint. "Take the band back to the hotel, Cami. I'll be back in a few days!"

Taken aback, the guard looked at Cami and scratched his head. "A few *days*, just like that? Dossi do that often?"

"All the time," Cami sighed.

Lyric swiftly made his way through the thinning crowds, running until he found a comfortably-unoccupied park. Closing his eyes, he spread his arms and let the transformation take him.

Behind a nearby tree, an ornately-robed mage watched the massive boralion break through the trees and take flight with a great deal of interest.

"...hmm. Why in such a hurry?" Dilndrou mused.

Gier, South Dreamsong

In the distance, large, bulbous shapes drifted on the horizon, gliding ever closer to the great city.
Draped with fine fabrics and golden, gleaming adornments, the strange zeppelins were a style seen nowhere in this part of the world.

As the local pilots watched through binoculars and telescopes from aboard their own Dremish airships-- great, shining contraptions of steel and bronze, rubber and leather-- their eyes widened, their jaws dropped.

Upon these ungainly aircraft rode scores of chimaera; distressed, distraught, uncharacteristically downtrodden.

These were Sorilian Zeppelins, and they seemed to be carrying precious cargo of a different sort than an outsider would ever suspect, not jewels, nor gold, nor foreign goods... but *refugees*.

Mere minutes later, the radio stations burst into life.

Breaking News - Soril City Under Attack; Lucsus Deserts Declared Restricted Area!
Recently-appointed Grand Raijin Sadinha Marvaa reports...

Silent Rose Axl Branch
Axl, South Dreamsong

"Congratulations to all of our new Docs," the High Surgeon announced. "In accordance with SRO protocol, you will all be assigned partners for your first round of research, to make certain that everyone is on the same page and capable of working as a group. Please open your work orders at this time, and form a single line to the left of the audience hall to find and introduce yourselves to your new colleagues."

The graduate doctors all stood, shuffling quietly over as instructed; Gabriel Gaunthier found himself drowning in a sea of people-- who knew that there were so many docs in Axl alone!

"I can't *believe* this," came a silky-smooth voice with more than a little derision. Turning on his heel, Gabe found himself face-to-face with a raven-haired beauty, scowling *at him!*

"I-I'm sorry? Is there something the matter?" he managed.

"I'm Eva Santora... *your new partner,*" the woman spat.

"O..oh, hello!" Gabe's expression brightened. "I'm Ga--"

"I *know* who you are, and I know about your so-called "lab-gremlin" stunt. We all do," Eva continued, narrowing her eyes and turning away to page through her leaflet. "I come from a very, very long line of professional, high-end cosmetic docs-- my family believes in good, *honest* business. Don't think for a *second* that you're going to make it to the next rank by leeching off of my work, or by coming up with any more fairy-tale tickets to another free promotion, Gaunthier."

Gabe's smile faded away again, wiped clean like dust from a table. "I-I... but...oh, *nevermind*," he sighed at last.

This was going to be a long semester.

The Grand Library
Jetersborough, South Dreamsong

"Your little friend, whoever he is, appears to know more than he's willing to share. You didn't bring the beast god here, did you?"

Nefirian sat at Marquise's desk-- the pair alone, save for an albino python that curled across the Doctor's shoulders, sullenly listening to their discussion.

"In other circumstances, I wouldn't put it past that old gator... but no, I don't believe so," Nef drawled. "Sometimes my more intelligent pets get a bit... willful."
Glancing down at the serpent, he shot it a brief glare-- its *true* identity was not for the head of the Court to know, lest they both be removed from the library.

Marquise nodded slightly. " ...Your gods have been content to keep you all in the dark, Nefirian. It's not unreasonable to consider that they've been playing with you more than they care to admit to."

"Not unreasonable in the least, no. As far as *I* am concerned... I no longer trust them, not that we should've taken them at face value years ago, but we were different people then. Greater forces are at play here than them, and I intend to discover what secrets have been kept from us. I will meet with Dilndrou again in time and wring what I can from him... but for *now*, I feel it wouldn't be unfair to ask his peers first."

"Who remains?" Marquise raised a delicate eyebrow. "Your Dilndrou is absent, the bear is unwilling to speak to anyone except my father, Aqk is.... deceptive in her nature, if Kelan is any indication."

"The lion, Aqk's mate. He has been under my little finger for a while now, though I've been waiting for an instance he might prove useful for... He is grateful for the land I grant him and the aid of my minions, but he laments some losses he suffered ages ago, and claims the others can continue to serve their purposes, while he... *cannot*. Perhaps you would like to accompany me and see if we can get him talking?"

Marquise was intrigued. "The lazy, dull-minded lion. Time hasn't been kind to him... as to the quality of the information he has to offer, that remains to be seen. I would like to take you up on that offer."

Nef grinned, gently stroking his pet's head as he rose to his feet. "Excellent. I'll call for my carriage at once."

Book III Prologue

Aenswynne City
The Petalforest, Schalle

Kelan Flarion rode swiftly upon the back of his steed, a massive red talstag bull, his grand antlers inhabited by a small flock of songbirds hanging on for dear life. The beast ran gracefully down the stone path into the heart of the strange wood, gigantic flowers and blooms of all kinds taking the place of normal trees.

The Petalforest, as it had come to be known, was home to the common folk of Schalle, not only active Firestarters but their families and friends-- *Aeneski*, dryad, pixie and sprite, as well as even more unusual creatures of the wilds. They lived in harmony here, safe from the rest of the world, tucked away beneath their gargantuan garden.

"Ya! As fast as you can carry me, my friend-- *go!*"

But now, it was in danger-- a danger few of them would have ever imagined.

Desperate to bring its companion to his destination, the talstag leapt gracefully over a fallen trunk, flying through the forest like a spirit on the wind, causing several of the little birds to flit off for a moment, startled.

Elves, fae, and people of the earth stepped aside to give the Chapter passage, worry immediately spreading throughout the city people as he went.
Kelan did not often visit them with such haste and such fear in his eyes; their concerns grew as he came to a halt at last before the city hall-- a simple structure of magic-sculpted wood, seated beneath the stalk of a grand sunflower.

"My people, my *friends*... grave times are upon us, I fear."

The Flamekeeper gazed down at them all from atop his mighty steed, his birds coming to perch atop his gleaming green pauldrons or atop his head as he waited for the crowds to gather, for the people of the city to lean from their windows and doors to hear his words.

A small group of pixies buzzed over the crowd to sit atop the stag's hind end, gazing up at Kelan with bright, damp eyes.

Nodding his head slowly to them, he swallowed the lump in his throat and continued.

"As you no doubt have noticed in recent times, our flarions have vanished in great flocks. Some precious few still remain, and you must thank them with all of your hearts that they have done so.
"With things as they are now, however... *Aenswynne is no longer safe*, and I must urge you all to gather those dear to you and flee."

The shocked gasps and hushed whispers filled the air at once. Leave Aenswynne? What could bring about such a suggestion-- what could possibly endanger their sacred forest home? They had lived here for centuries, and few outsiders knew such a place could even exist, let alone where it was.
The very thought was preposterous!

Kelan closed his eyes for a moment to take a breath. This was no easier for him to say than for these people to consider, but too much was at stake to stall-- and time was of the essence!

"I know, my friends. I know. But I can't in good faith allow you to stay here without warning of things to come. The missing flarion have

left *of their own accord*-- they mean to attack us, and they will surely come here first!"

At once, shock grew disbelief and anger. His people began to shout and yell at him, some turning to go back into their homes, others pushing forward to demand answers.

"Flarion, attacking the Petalforest? What's gotten into you?!"

"We love you, but how can we believe a thing like that?"

"Lord Flamekeeper, why? What's going on?!"

"That'll never happen! The flarion are our protectors-- your *children*!"

"Times are changing," hissed a voice from above.
Shining gold scales reflected the sunlight from atop the giant flowers-- three pairs of wings spread in display, high above the city. Two of the dragons were young, mere decades from the egg, and they dipped their heads and shrieked, heralding their commander's presence.

The people of Aenswynne grew silent, turning to stare at the three flarion looking down upon them.

Wyra Casarilinia lifted her feathery red crest. "Hello, *granddaddy*. You didn't waste a *second* in getting here, did you? That old deer of yours can move."

"Don't toy with me, Casarilinia-- it's unbecoming of a lady," Kelan said through clenched teeth. "What do you intend to do here?"

Kelan already knew the answer; he had known long before she had come to do her work, before his son had even given her permission to act. He tightened his grip upon the reins as his talstag snorted, dipping its head and standing firm.

"Why... we're here to take back what belongs to the *planet*."

A single, female voice cut into the uneasy silence-- a confession of thoughts running through everyone's minds.
"The flarion have gone mad! Run for your lives!"

The city square exploded into chaos.
Far above, the three dragons drew deep breaths.

Book II Chapter 1: Checkmate

Aenswynne City
The Petalforest, Schalle

The Petalforest was *burning*, burning like dry tinder in the breath of the dragons he had helped create.

It was never meant to be like this.

Once Wyra Casarilinia-- the very same old dragon who had once guarded these very lands with her life-- had uttered her ominous words, Aenswynne's people had finally understood what Kelan Flarion had been trying to tell them just moments before.

Times, indeed, were changing.

The plants themselves had bent and swayed to protect the fleeing populace, sacrificing themselves for the ones who had nurtured them for millenia; now, flowers fell like trees struck by lightning, crashing to the ground even as they dried, shriveled, crumbled away into ash that swirled through the air and stuck in Kelan's throat.

The youngest of the three flarions dropped from the sky to land before him, approaching with a dangerous glint in her blazing red eyes; wings spread, jaws parted to hiss loudly, full of threat.

Kelan's bow was in his hands, an arrow at the ready before the beast could blink, but not before it could swipe at him with a monstrous, golden claw. He caught the blow on his side, tumbling away just as another great flower toppled between them, consumed by the white-hot flames.
Rising to his feet, he watched as the ash gathered like snow around his boots; new blades of grass pushed from underneath like tiny ears, new life that would undoubtedly be scorched away again in mere minutes.

It was never *meant to be like this.*

"So long as I live, beast... I will hunt you and your ilk down to the very last for this. *I swear it!*" Kelan roared.

High above the burning Petalforest, Casarilinia flew in lazy circles, swooping down now and again towards trees and titan flowers that hadn't yet caught fire. Opening her great maw, she spewed forth blue-white flames that latched onto the living plants as though they were already dry and dead, searing them into ash.

Some part of her regretted the work; Aenswynne had always been dear to her, indeed, it *still* was. But the Firestarters' greatest flaw had been their inability to raze things of sentimental value, things that would die soon enough on their own anyhow-- and even more swiftly with the threat of the Mirajin's ever-present, toxic aura.

Valdren had impressed upon her the necessity of doing away with such a flawed outlook; destruction was only the first step, after all.

What they set aflame would regrow, full of life and free of any taint.

Her eldest daughter flew past overhead; dipping her head respectfully, she bellowed, a sentiment Casari returned with pride swelling in her chest. "Go on, then! We're on a schedule, my sweetling!"

The old dragon circled again, her gaze now directed far below to her other chick, in the heat of battle with Kelan Flarion himself. Reluctant to strike out against his own blood despite his furious cries to the contrary, the younger flarion had him on the defensive, snapping and lunging and toying with him to buy them all precious time.

They had expected the Chapter to hold his own in battle, and yet he refused to take the upper hand. Each arrow fired was fired merely to threaten or wound, each move he made was to deflect incoming blows.

But it was wearing him down visibly; he slipped and trudged through the thickening ash, crushing the shoots of tiny new plants growing by the magic of the ashes underfoot. The rising temperature choked his breath away, and sweat beaded across his brow.

They only needed to stall him for a bit longer, at least-- if her little daughter didn't manage to kill the pitiful thing first.

Her eyes never leaving the battle, Casari landed atop a great chrysanthemum, giving it a hearty push to topple it into the ongoing blaze. Her heart leapt with the excitement of it all, and she grinned.

Perhaps she could grow used to this.

Kelan carefully dodged and parried each blow the young flarion dealt him, but his attention was on its mother, swooping overhead. The old dragon undoubtedly knew his reluctance to kill, knew that each swing of the dragon's talons and each snap of its jaws took its toll on him, even when they didn't land.
They were *playing with him*, buying time for *something*-- but he couldn't risk leaving now, under such direct attack.

His people had managed to escape the inferno in its earliest stages, and that was what he had come here to ensure. Now left to face the rogue dragons alone, he refused to stoop to their level.

It was a line they wouldn't, *couldn't* force him to cross. Not here, not now, not like *this*. He would find a way to prevail without resorting to... *to*...

Pursing his lips, Kelan drew a ragged breath, using all of his strength to bat away the dragon's next swing with the flat of his blade-- then turned, breaking into a run and diving into the thick of the burning forest.
Taken by surprise, his attacker paused to watch him for a moment before giving chase with an excited shriek, throwing bits of flaming debris out of the way with her wings.

This was the reaction the Chapter had been hoping for. Dodging through the flaming brush, he abandoned his weapons as he ran, content for now merely to gain ground between them. The heat and smoke were oppressive, but he could survive it for the time being-- a gift he found himself grudgingly thanking the Mirajin for.
Trudging over a small stream, he risked pausing a moment to catch his breath. The air was cooler here; in the distance, he could see unharmed forest ahead.

Flarion fire was all-consuming-- but it tended to burn away its fuel swiftly, as a consequence. Left to its own devices, the fire wouldn't have spread far.

Hearing the frenzied but clumsy approach of the young flarion behind him, Kelan gritted his teeth and began to run again. That the thing seemed reluctant to slay him as well had proven his good fortune thus far.

A keening shriek was his only warning; the untouched forest ahead exploded with a flash of light and heat, trees and flowers toppling as his pursuer's older sister threw herself down atop them.
Turning her head to eye him, flames licked at her maw as she opened her mouth to draw a breath.

This one didn't seem quite so eager to play.

Kelan closed his eyes, gently dropping to his knees and pressing his palms into the arid soil.
Even with the plants razed, the earth and rock itself would give of itself to protect him, if only he asked.

But as the dragon's fiery breath burst forward to engulf him, it was not rock and mud, but a bubble of pure magic that materialized to shield the Chapter from certain death.

Tired of flying about like a crazed bird, Casari watched the proceedings from atop a rocky perch, her sharp teeth gleaming in the firelight as she grinned.

Not content to merely keep the Flamekeeper busy, her children were closing in for the final blow! Surely, he would find himself paralyzed with regret and unable to lift a finger to save himself. Lifting her feathery crest with pride, the old flarion stretched her neck for a better view--

--gasping in shock as the air itself suddenly filled with billions of tiny, fluttering insects, buzzing and darting, so dense as to even blot out the light of the suns.

No, not insects. Faeries.

Alone, the little creatures were insignificant, hardly worthy of a passing glance. But like ants, in such massive numbers, they were capable of far more-- capable of frightening power, capable of weaving intricate magics the likes of which the world had never seen in the hands of any other.

Capable of coming to the Chapter's aid-- and their presence heralded the arrival of countless other angry creatures far below, eager to save their beloved king, charging forward on foot and hoof and wing.

"Out! Out of the forest, my loves! We leave at once! NOW!"

"Milord. Milord, are you alright?"

"We came as swiftly as we could! Please, you must hurry!"

"Master Kelan, the Peak!"

"Hurry, hurry!"

The tiny voices buzzed all around him within the bubble of magic, equally tiny bodies flitting in and out, attending to him, gesturing wildly, sobbing and shrieking and tugging at his ears to get his attention even as their spell whisked him up into the air.

Even as the sprites chattered and fussed and droned, even as cierne and dryad and centaur and all the wild spirits of Schalle poured into the ashen wood to engage the two young flarions far below, Kelan felt a familiar ache tugging at him; a dull, throbbing sensation in his mind growing more pressing by the second.

Ages ago, when Kelan had first *changed*, one of his most drastic discoveries was a gift-- or, perhaps, even a *curse*-- for intuition on a grand

scale. Significant changes for Valenth's eternal cycle of life caused a ripple effect that he could feel moments beforehand. It had taken quite some time for him to realize exactly what his sudden aches meant (especially in combination with constant torment from the tiny pinpricks that stabbed at him whenever any creature's life was snuffed), but it had eventually become a useful, if not particularly welcome, method of warning.

It was especially unwelcome at this very moment, in fact.

"The Peak! Please, milord!"

"We will take you there-- we must!"

"Something terrible has come about!"

Their tiny voices flooded his ears, and as their words sank in, the terrible realization dawned on him.
Of course.

"Take me at once, I beg of you-- we have not a second to spare!"

The bubble of faerie magic bobbed and spun on the wind before rocketing away, the sounds of the fierce battle below fading into a distant roar.

"TREACHEROUS VERMIN! YOU WILL BURN, EVERY LAST... *EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU WILL* BURN!"

Wyra Casarilinia hurled herself onto the ground, belching flame and lashing out at anyone, anything that dared come close.

They had slain one of her *babies*, her precious daughters-- too late, she had heard her mother's call and turned to take wing.
Before the young flarion could flee with her older sister, the forest-things had turned upon her, tearing her forcefully away from the Chapter by her wings, battering her with their clubs and sticks and spears, crippling her, overwhelming her.

Now the furious mother dragon tore a great swath of destruction, her vision red, her terrible voice a blood-curdling wail that sent shivers down even the ghostly spines of the banshees that skulked about in the valleys below.

"YOU SHALL ALL DIE! YOUR CORPSES SHALL SERVE AS FERTILIZER! WE ARE THE RENATUS PURIFICO! YOU...

"YOU ARE A PLAGUE UPON THE WORLD!!"

Aqk's Peak, Schalle

"This is as far as we dare go!"

"Please, be careful!"

"Hurry!"

"You must do *something!"*

The magical bubble faded, and Kelan Flarion dropped onto the ground on his hands and knees, gazing up at the charred remains of the great mountain.
"Is this the price I am to pay for my honor? What is *left* to save?"

His head pulsed; crying out, Kelan reached to cradle it in his arms, wincing as a furious screech from above threatened to burst his eardrums.

"You have gone *too far*, Valdren! You know well the price for such treachery!" Aqk cried, winging away from the massive flarion Prince on her tail.

" This is not a matter of betrayal... there are more significant things at stake than brief, *meaningless* mortal lives!

Eagle and wyrm circled above the peak, their massive wings thundering like drums against the wind as the chapter looked on, rushing closer as fast as his tired legs could carry him.

"...*meaningless?* Valdren, you understand so little. *All life*, regardless of form or brevity, holds value! Your father taught you as much!"

The flarion Prince's derisive laughter made Kelan's heart sink into his gut. "He taught me something, yes... that the fate of Valenth can't be left in his hands, at any price!" With terrible swiftness, Valdren dove at Aqk, cold fury in his eyes; his talons cut only air. Snarling, he turned to swing again, but the eagle-goddess gracefully dodged each blow.

"So be it. Valdren Flarion... *this ends here, now. Aka-qi-senn.*"

The three strange words were but a whisper, but the winds seemed to take hold of them, transforming them into a gale force that threw Aqk high into the clouds like a kite even as it battered at the shocked dragon's scaled wings.

Valdren tumbled from the air, struggling to regain altitude, to avoid crashing into the sharp rocks far below. He dove, gliding shakily before digging his claws into the cliff face to drag himself back onto solid ground.
Aqk swept downward, her speed enhanced by the ancient wind magic, dropping onto Valdren's face and battering him soundly, relentlessly with her wings and talons. Blood and scales rained down upon the scorched earth.

Overwhelmed, Valdren released his hold, pushing away from the rock to tumble over backwards and down into the surrounding valley. Aqk pursued, screeching a curse as she went. They wheeled and spun through the turbulent winds, grabbing hold of one another at last as they ascended once more--

And, taking in a great breath, Valdren spewed a great gout of flame into the eagle's face. In agony, she fell back at last, shaking her head and winging away to regain her senses.

But this was the opening the dragon needed. As the winds died away, he shot forward, grabbing the bird's left wing in his maw and twisting sharply, bringing both crashing to the ground.

"Did... did you think your magic would win this for you? I've flown in worse conditions than *that*..."

Kelan began to move closer, his heart pounding. "Aqk!"

Rearing up, the eagle kicked gravel and dust into Valdren's face and struggled to inch forward, her wing flopping uselessly beside her.
Hissing angrily, Valdren twisted and pulled as the great bird lifted her head to gaze down upon her *Aeneski* friend.
"Kelan... g..*go. Get away from--"*

But the Chapter stared forward, his eyes blank. Reaching into the open air, he took hold of something tiny with his thumb and forefinger. Aqk's eyes widened in understanding.

"I... I'm sorry, Aqk. I... I can't take any more. *I can't..."*

Invisible to all but Kelan's eyes, a delicate silver cord rested between his fingertips; one of many hundreds of billions of strands that bound all life together, and to the heart of the world itself.

"...I'm sorry." He bent it between his fingernails.

Valdren threw back his head and screamed, a painful, agonized roar that echoed down the mountain and shook it to its core. Stumbling backward, he thrashed wildly, whipping his tail, beating his wings and shrieking every swear that came to his scaly lips.

Shocked, Kelan looked on; this had not been the effect he was hoping for. Aqk gazed down at him, gasping quietly for breath as the Flamekeeper's son shrieked behind her.

"...Kelan... you've come so far. You've been through so much to come to this point... and to you, it must not seem... like much of a victory."
"Don't speak, you're injured. I'll try again. I'm going to do this the right way now. I can't--"

But the eagle shook her head. "...there is a difference between being immortal, and being *an immortal*, Kelan. You... are still learning how to be... what you are. You haven't made the mistakes you... believe you have."

Valdren had fallen silent again; approaching slowly, his shadow loomed overhead. Kelan took hold of the thread and pulled at it with all his might. It had to break!

Aqk closed her eyes. "I am lost. Find my children, Kelan Flarion. The... the *true ones*, the ancient ones. They will know you... they will teach you what you n--"

" You caught me off guard, you *bastard.* It won't happen again." Leaping forward, Valdren clamped his jaws around the great eagle's throat and twisted; with a sickening crunch, she shuddered and fell still.
Dropping her body at his father's feet, Valdren glowered down at him. "Aqk was wrong...*She* was your first mistake, Kelan. *I* was your second. This ends *now*."

Kelan's expression went cold. "...you're right, Valdren... *it does*."

A sharp crack broke the ominous silence-- followed by another, and another.
The rocky earth split open at Valdren's feet as thick, green vines burst from it, taking hold of his wrists and ankles, wrapping tightly around his throat and wings, tying his great jaws shut. Hundreds grasped onto him, dragging him down, down until his scaly underbelly was held tight against the ash-covered ground.

*"...what is this?!"*The wyrm shrieked.

But the Flamekeeper was silent.

His son had spat in his face; he had insulted him and fled from home; that was trivial.
He had schemed against him, and plotted to take his throne; that was forgivable.

But now, he had betrayed him; he had turned his own children against him, endangered the lives of his people, *and murdered his mentor and greatest friend before his very eyes.*

"I have had ENOUGH!*"*

In that moment, something within Kelan's heart had finally broken. Yes, Aqk *had* been wrong-- he *had* made mistakes, grave, foolish mistakes.

He would not do so again.

Stepping forward, he took hold of Valdren's snout as the beast was held prone, despite struggling against his bonds. Kelan's hands began to glow; bright, blinding white, the color of flarions' breath, as searing as the suns themselves.

For the second time, Valdren began to scream-- and for the first time, *Kelan no longer cared.*
His son had earned his fate, and now his vitality would be returned to the planet he had sworn to set aflame.

"Stop! STOP!LET GO OF ME!"

The glow spread over Kelan's arms, his head and through him as Valdren's vitae drained slowly into the ground at his feet. The dragon thrashed and shrieked, his struggle gradually weakening.

Something glimmered just out of Kelan's line of vision; momentarily distracted, he glanced down for the source.

A crystal, shining in the light against his boot; more formed as he watched, tinkling softly, rock, new grass and sprouts turning to glass before his eyes.

Valdren.

Horrified, Kelan lost his concentration; the glow faded from his hands even as the vines that held Valdren down began to crystallize.

Furious, Valdren spread his wings over his head, breaking free and rising to his feet.

In an instant, Aqk's Peak was engulfed in flames again.

Book III Chapter 2: A Display of Dominance

Aqk's Peak, Schalle

With his children at all sides, fierce and imposing, Valdren Flarion gazed down upon the people of Schalle from atop Aqk's Peak, his expression unreadable.
In his talons, he held something small and black, an object singed but not consumed by flames.

"Aqk is dead. *Aqk is dead, and Kelan Flarion is dead!*"

He held the thing up for all to see, but no one could react with more than numb shock; too much had happened here already, and their pain was too fresh, too *raw* for their hearts to register any more.

It was an *Aeneski* skull, scorched and cracked, and Valdren displayed it with no small amount of grim pride.

"This country is now under the rule of the Renatus Purifico. *Firestarters*... consider this us extending an invitation to join us. You may aid us in cleansing the world by fire and rebuilding it anew-- or you may decline, leave the country unharmed at once, and accept your eventual, inevitable fates.
"The choice is yours."

The flarion dragons of the Renatus Purifico lifted their wings and bellowed their victory in unison, as the mortals and fae at the foot of the mountain huddled together in grief.

But far below, beneath the feet of the people of Schalle, beneath the soil and roots, deep within the heart of the world, something pulsed and stirred, calling softly to the hearts of all those with the means to listen.

For a moment, their grief became resolve, silent but *undeniable*.

The Firestarters and their kin-- the children of Kelan Flarion-- turned to make their way out into the world, before their lord's son could find reason to retract his promise of safe passage.

As they headed towards the country's ports, they whispered amongst themselves, careful not to let the patrolling flarion swooping overhead hear.

"Did you feel it?" they gasped. "We're not alone! All is not lost yet... we must bide our time."

And so, with prayers in their hearts, they left the only home they had ever known, heading forward into an uncertain future.

Book III Chapter 3: Stay Strong, Little Ones...

The fae of Schalle have never known the outside world.
Frightened and overwhelmed, they travel to the four corners of Valenth with their loved ones-- tucked away atop a snug hat, curled up within backpacks and pouches, hanging on inside pockets or quivers.

The Aeneski and humans, and even the now-rare benevolent flarion know of the great cities of the world; of Gier and Axl, of Lassenbhurg and Faerwethr and Jetersborough and even Ros Albion and Laps-du-Ment, for now they have nowhere to call home, and beggars can't be choosers, they say.

So the sprites, the tiniest people in the world, stay close to their tall friends, close their eyes and whisper prayers to the forces of the world that they might be the lucky ones, that they might find a place to stay for now, a place with food and drink and company.

The people of Schalle have yet to hear of the fate of the chimaera of Soril; the inns and taverns are full to the brim, and even the streets boast a surprising number of refugees even before their arrival.

Frightened and desperate, they turn their heads to the sky as they huddle where they may, their heads full of questions that must mirror those in the minds and hearts of the beast-people they share the roads with.

Why us?
What went wrong?

... what do we do now?

And in a world made for the tall peoples, the sprites are more lost than any.

"Don't despair," they whisper to one another. "Things can only improve from here, surely."

Book III Chapter 4: Begin Again

Unknown

A blinding light pulsed rhythmically, *thud-thump, thud-thump*, as if it were the heart of a great creature made of energy.

What... is this? What's happened, who...?

...ah. I understand.

No, I can't stay long... everything is at stake.
I... I remember that... but you must teach me what I need to know.

Tell me who I am, and what must be done.

Gier, South Dreamsong

"I know you've all been through so much... but stay strong. The city of Gier will do everything it can for the relief effort-- and the Somnambulist Project will do what we can, as well."
Elliot watched with sad eyes as refugees flowed into the city from the zeppelin docks; an endless sea of downtrodden and frightened people of all ages and walks of life, crammed into their little capitol city.

They wore their most urgent thought upon their faces, all of them; *what do we do now?*

News of the catastrophe in Soril had spread like wildfire with the fleeing chimaera. Many of the survivors had come here to Gier, or gone south from their homeland to Lassenbhurg, bringing stories of the huge, reptilian beasts that had torn through their rocky, subterranean city and laid it to waste.

Rumor had it that their former ruler had been responsible for everything, from the initial attacks on would-be oil-seekers, to the final, terrifying strike on Soril itself.

The Sorilians had been forced to leave everything behind and run; the Luxi deserts were no longer safe, and to stay meant certain death. All these people had left now were their families, if they were lucky, and memories of a life now in ruin.

"These are trying times for everyone. We'll help you through them, I promise."

Book III Chapter 5: To The Loyal Ones

Carl Christoph Museum of Science and History
Gier, South Dreamsong

Elliot Christoph stood at the podium within the museum's Grand Hall, gazing down upon the audience gathered at her feet. Taking a deep breath, she paused to gently stroke her younger brother's scaly head before beginning at last.

"Thank you for coming to our Open House, everyone-- I hope you've enjoyed yourselves in our institution tonight. As was mentioned earlier, I have a very special announcement to make tonight.
"We of the Somnambulist Project-- the organization funding this museum, as you all know-- have made it our absolute duty to serve the people in any way the scientific community could. With the recent tragedy in Lucsus, many people have been left with uncertain futures. It's for that reason that we are opening our doors to all those who might be seeking work and a place to stay, not just for the people of Soril, but for everyone.
"While the Somnambulist Project is largely a scientific organization, we have many positions for people of all walks of life and a variety of talents and skill levels.
"All we ask is that you come willing to learn, and willing to lend a hand to those who may need it most."

The audience broke into brisk applause.

The Grand Library
Jetersborough, South Dreamsong

The soft rustle of paper rose eyes from their books; several courtesans filed down into the main library area, carefully tacking leaflets to the walls, occasionally handing them to curious people who decided to stand and ask what was afoot.

> Official Notice
>
> *The Court would like to announce that we are seeking knowledgable individuals for apprenticeship within our ranks.*
> *Interested parties may seek a senior Courtesan in the Grand Library for details on how to join.*
> *Particularly helpful applicants will recieve compensation for their time and effort.*
>
> *Thank you.*
>
> Lady Marquise

Laps-Du-Ment, Chimre

People flowed like water through the busy city streets, briefcases and knapsacks and lunchtins in hand as they made ther way.

The public loudspeakers suddenly blared to life, the ping of the familiar harpischord jingle announcing an incoming message, spoken in the warm, proud and familiar voice of the country's leader.

"The Silent Rose has had a positive influence on the lives of millions, from the food you eat and the clothes you wear to the ground-breaking medicines and care that keeps your loved ones in tip-top shape-- and now, YOU can become part of the fold!
We're more than just scientists; we're farmers, workers, artisans and everyday people working to make a difference in our world.
Visit your local SRO branch to learn more. Join the Rose Revolution today and help shape the future--
because We Know!"

Konshtul Village
Boar's Wood, South Dreamsong

The earth itself seemed to rumble in time to the sound of silisk drummers as they played a driving rhythm on the coebhcouh-- a traditional instrument made for sharing.
The lizard-people wrapped warm wool blankets around shoulders and handed out bowls of steaming broth to their unexpected guests.

The Firestarters had been here for a few days now, seeking shelter as they quietly wondered what came next. Elves, humans, fae and even primal elemental creatures had traveled across oceans to find safety; their lands had been snatched away from them and burned to ash.

They were welcome here for as long as they needed the shelter, either way; the tribe elders were happy to aid their new friends.

Suddenly, an explosion of flame lit the clearing, sending people scattering for cover and bringing the music to a stop.
Silisk, human and fae looked on in astonishment as a golden bird flew in circles overhead, trumpeting mightily.

"A sign from the spirits themselves!" a silisk breathed, watching as the creature landed on a small stone, dipping its head. "What would you ask from us, O mighty phoenix?"

"Hark!" the bird cried. "The time has come to regroup. Come, and bring those you hold dear who would stand strong in the name of life itself!
"*Valenth needs heroes*-- The Flamekeeper awaits!"

Book III Chapter 6: White Petals

The Silent Garden

Scenario Space, Reverie

The ground was blanketed in soft, white petals, falling gracefully from the sky like snow-- as was always the case here, in this ethereal vision.

Elliot sat quietly upon her knees, blinking slowly to adjust her eyes to the brilliant scene.

It had been a long time.

"El...*Elliot*..."

She paused with the usual answer on her lips, raising an eyebrow in concern.
Elliot Christoph's dreams had been haunted for years now-- shortly after she had founded the Somnambulist Project, in fact.

Ever since, she would find herself in these very gardens just after drifting into restful sleep, and just before her mind continued on its aimless path through the mists of dreams. It continued every evening for years, beginning with a simple question that had been answered in the same way every night.

...until her younger brother had been tragically altered during a freak accident in Ros Albion.

Elliot knew he had felt responsible for the attacks, but his absence had left her wondering if she would ever see him again, if he had decided it best to stay well away from her out of guilt or some other pain.

If not for the obvious dread in his voice, she would have been glad for her friend's return. "... I've missed you, but I'm afraid to ask why you're making an appearance again *now* after all this time."

"You didn't say no."

The ritual, it seemed, was still intact after all; Elliot managed a faint smile.

"*No*, Nefirian. Now... talk to me. *Please?*"

"I can't say much, but I still need to warn you. Times are... *changing*, and it will affect everyone...*everything*."

"Ah, so the truth comes out. I don't like when things worry you; I've got *mortal concerns* to struggle with. Changing *how?"*

"Ke--... *a friend* is missing. I can't sense him any longer, and that has potentially dire ramifications for the rest of Valenth."

A chill wind blew, sending petals scattering over the ground. Elliot bit her lip and shivered slightly, aware that her companion seemed not to so much as notice the temperature. "I'm not sure what to make of that, but thank you for the heads up."

He nodded slowly, his gaze averted; the once-aeneski's green eyes darted to and fro nervously. *"How... is Cazwell?"*

"You haven't *truly* stayed away for so long because of that, *have you*, Nefirian? He's fine. We're both fine, and what happened wasn't anything you could've helped-- I don't believe you would've let it happen, if it was.
"Now, please... enough of this silliness. We're *still friends*..."

But as swiftly as he had come, the Chapter was gone, and the dream of the white garden with him.

Helplessly, Elliot's mind spiraled away into the comforting darkness of *deep, peaceful slumber*.

Book III Chapter 7: City Living

Gier, South Dreamsong

"It was slaughter. Absolute brutality," a chimaera woman cried, holding her tiny cub to her breast.

In shelters and public places, on benches, in pubs, libraries and by kiosks, the refugees of Soril had made themselves-- temporarily, at least-- at home, and began to share their tales with anyone who would listen to them.

"Claws like sabres, as... as long as my forearm-- they towered over us even with their backs hunched!"

"Their eyes were like... like... *burning embers!"*

"They destroyed our homes, our city! We've never so much as harmed a hair on--...well, they don't have *hair*, no, but if they did..."

"And we all have Dalnak to thank." Grand Rajiin Sadinha sat atop the head of one of her guards, gazing solemnly down at her people scattered haphazardly around the street like stray dogs. They were downtrodden and lost, and it was her responsibility to lead them back to the pride that Dalnak and the accursedAmolhad snatched from them. "Do not walk with such heavy hearts, my friends. I have a plan."

Reaching into her lotus-flower headpiece, sadinha gently lifted her golden scarablodica, whispering a message into its speaker.
The creature clicked twice and spread its wings-- abruptly shooting off into the distance as a police carriage came thundering down the road, its rider severely hassling the poorland drakethat pulled it as another man hung from the side door with a megaphone.

"A murder! There's been a murder in Gier! The killer is still at large; go home, lock your windows and doors, and turn on your radios for more information!"

The refugees turned to look at one another.
Was this common here?

"Gather together, my loves. Any poor sap who tries to harm the people of Soril will be holding his head in his lap!"

Book III Chapter 8: Delicate Manipulations

Jetersborough, South Dreamsong

Even in the low light, the tiny golden lodica shone like a beacon as it hovered over its assigned target, filling the room with a low drone as it waited patiently to be noticed by the sleeping figure.
Sure enough, after a few long moments of incessant buzzing, a hand emerged from the bed to swat it dismissively away... and the resulting *thud* of the little insect's body hitting the floor finally had the desired effect.

Blinking tiredly, Marquise's hand slid over the edge of the bed and groped blindly in the darkness for the offending machine, scooping it up and running a finger over what served for the creature's head. A beep, and another attempt to blind her as the little pink lights shone brighter than ever, and the voice of the tiny chimaera could be heard from within, clearly anxious...

Its mission complete, the lodica fell silent, the pink eyes flashing expectantly, awaiting the return message.

"Forgive me, Grand Rajiin Sadinha, but I am afraid I cannot honour your request for aid beyond that which has been arranged for you - those ahead of you await your arrival, and offer plentiful food and shelter for your people.
"My apologies, The Court cannot assist in such direct acts."

She stroked the little head again, and the lodica hummed to itself, turning around in her hands and flexing its wings before zooming back off out of the open window, a tiny pink star in the darkness... blinking, blinking, gone.

Beside her, a warm body stirred, though it seemed reluctant to sit up or roll over to talk to her properly. "What wassat?"

"...The chimaeras want retribution for the loss of their city. They feel betrayed by their leader, and the pact he thought would protect them... but, of course, we can't be seen to side with any one race, especially in a time of conflict."

Movement, slow and sluggish, followed by another bright light that left her squinting... and Ecleco lazily dragged himself into a sitting position beside her, blocking out most of the light from the lamp by the bed.

His efforts were met with a scowl.

"You're not going to do anything? You've been stressing out since you returned from the amol invasion... the First are still in discussions, aren't they?

The First were the Court's answer to a council of elders. The first seven generations, the oldest and most experienced House Courtesans... for Marquise to have called it at all spoke volumes for the severity of the situation.
They were a sore spot for Ecleco, and Marquise could hear the slight bitterness in his voice.

He was from the eighth.

"I spoke with them last night. We have decided, after much debate, that the best course of action will be to kill two birds with one stone... or one of them, at least. While we cannot interfere directly, the willful taking of an Erosion's life will not go unanswered."

Marquise paused, her shoulders slumping slightly, and ran her fingers tiredly through her hair.
"It is my intention that my brother shall somehow be made aware of the madness of the amols, corrupted by an unknown mirajin source. He won't be able to resist. With any luck, one side will be forced back, and the other will, at the very least, take casualties. Any further action will depend on the outcome... Such drastic measures would not be necessary if they'd taken on Courtesans when the offers were made."

Silence fell between them, the only sound coming from the early birds of morning outside, creeping in with the first hints of dawn.

" The amols are really corrupted by mirajin?"

"...No."

Book III Chapter 9: Breaking News!

Gier, South Dreamsong

We have a breaking news bulletin tonight.

Authorities report that several people have been murdered in Gier and Axl over the past few evenings, with several more reported missing.

Victims' names will not yet be released; all have been found within alleyways, inn rooms and private residences, presumably in areas where the deceased believed they were alone.

The cause of death is currently believed to be magic or poison of some sort; police refused to elaborate on the physical state of the victims found beyond "disturbing".

A total of twelve victims have been found so far, three in Gier and nine in Axl.
There are currently no suspects or witnesses.

Authorities urge citizens of both cities to remain indoors with windows and doors locked and to stay in groups with other people whenever possible.

More information will be released as it is obtained; anyone with tips or information that may lead to arrests is urged to visit the nearest police district.

Book III Chapter 10:In The Dark of Night

Axl, South Dreamsong

Doctor Gabriel Gaunthier sullenly stared out of the lobby window as his associate-- temporary, if there was any such thing in the world as good fortune-- gathered her things into a shoulder bag, her red lips drawn tight.

Something flitted past the window, grabbing his attention for a split second before galloping off into the shadows of evening.
Probably a stray dog chasing after something, he tried to reassure himself with a gulp, glancing back to Eva momentarily.

"Brilliant," she sighed. "We get sent on a mission to survey the area for strange activity, and I'm paired up with the likes of you. Get away from that window-- I don't want you seeing ghosts before we've even left."

Had he done something in a past life to deserve this, or was this perhaps a test before greater things?
Quietly, he shook his head-- it wasn't worth causing a stir now.

"Right... let's go, then."

The pair traveled out by foot, slowly making their way around the outskirts of Axl. The forests were surprisingly thick so close to the city, making for poor vision even under Chira's light; tiny shapes fluttered overhead in great flocks, darting back and forth to dine on a hearty meal of insects.

The trees rustled overhead, shaken by a brisk wind that sounded unnervingly like a soft voice whispering to them. Eva clenched her teeth and swallowed, gathering her nerves around her as best she could as they continued on their patrol.

A twig snapped a few feet behind them and she yelped, whipping her head around for a look. Finding nothing, Eva's cheeks grew warm with embarassment; she couldn't let her fear show in front of Gaunthier.

Especially not this early into the night.

"I didn't join the SRO to do grunt work like this, anyway. Why are we even out here? Don't we have... I don't know, *trained agents* for this sort of shit?"

"We're all required to do some field work, in case the Organization needs us later."

"Ugh."

The Organization. She didn't like the way he said it; as though it was some sort of great beast in its own right; huge and looming, stuffed with secrets far more frightening than the silly rumors civilians were so fond of spreading about it.

Her family had been part of the Silent Rose for four generations now, a family of cosmetic surgeons, or *cosmo docs* as they were called in the SRO, they had made a name for themselves both within the fold and outside of it-- earning a slot in a Santora's patient list was a feat as much as an honor.

They were experts with the scalpel-- *not field scientists.*

SNAP.

"I've had it! Gabe, get the damn torch on!"

On edge, Eva inched closer to Gabriel as he lit a mirashard torch, carefully shining its light in a circle around them both.

Something glinted in the shadows; the off-white sheen of well-used, bared teeth.
Gabe immediately froze in place, taking hold of Eva's wrist and squeezing tight, a soft, shocked *oh* falling from his lips.

"Stay behind me, Eva, and don't move. *Th... they have us surrounded..."*

"...*they?* I swear, Gaunthier, if you are playing games with--"

As Eva stared into the trees, the darkness around them seemed to move in closer, a mass of hostile, slinking shadows with unsettling ruby eyes...

Book III Chapter 11: Frightening Implications

The Somnambulist's Office
Carl Christoph Museum of Science and History
Gier, South Dreamsong

Hunched over her desk, Elliot scribbled notes into her journal at a fevered pace.
What she had seen tonight had shaken her to her very core; a visit to Gier's police headquarters had given her a firsthand look at the carnage committed over the past few evenings.

She couldn't get the images out of her head, which had proven a curse as much as a boon.

Still no suspects yet, they had said. *We're stumped-- and the longer we take to work it out, the more people will die like this.*

She clenched her eyes tight and shuddered, slamming her pen down with a sharp crack before standing to pluck books from the shelves surrounding her office, one at a time.

Pages were flipped, notes were referenced, checked, written; theories rose and fell. As the evening continued, Elliot shook off her exhaustion even as her teeth chattered at the implications she was uncovering.

No poison could create effects such as that; no *magic* any legal mage had ever cast...

Dry, shriveled bodies... grasping, clawlike hands... and eyes gaping in a mix of pain and... *ecstasy?*
There were no obvious wounds; leupaks could suck a creature dry if they wanted, certainly, but the clawtongue would've left an obvious gash or entrance wound somewhere.

Even then, the victims wouldnt've looked so... *willing*.

Eyeing her page of messy notes, Elliot dropped into her chair again, pressing her palms to her face with an agonized groan.

There were only three possible causes of such a horrible fate... and none of them would win her any credibility.

"...shit. *Caz!* Get in here!"

Book III Chapter 12: Deeper Darkness

"Wh.. where are they taking us?!"
"You ask like *I'd know...*"

Much to Gabriel's hesitant relief, the pack of huge, black worgn that they had encountered seemed less interested in eating them right this moment than in herding them through the woods like...

...no, nothing involving the word *slaughter* was a good simile to make at this point in time.

The pair carefully made their way deeper into the dark forest as the wolves snapped at their heels, snarling and making it very clear to Gabe who was in charge (in other words, certainly not him-- though it was a nice change of pace to see something keeping Eva in her place, as well).

Eager to keep his posterior intact, he obediently made his way toward into a large cave, noting that as he did so that several of the beasts stopped to block the entrance as they passed.

Inside, then.
"Come on, Gabriel-- maybe there is a mage or something in here that we can beat the shit out of for this stupid game."

Gabe raised an eyebrow. "...do magi typically live in random caves?"

"Just *shut up and come on!"*

Heading in at last, Gabriel and Eva watched nervously as bats-- *unnervingly large*, black bats, with beady little red eyes and sharp-looking fangs-- flitted overhead.

One invited itself onto Eva's shoulder, coaxing a terrified shriek from her.
Helpfully, Gabe gathered the creature up in his hands; it bit his palm and lapped up the bead of blood before hurriedly winging away.

Gabe gently sucked on the wound as they walked, glancing back. "Are you alright?"

Eva didn't respond, glowering down at her feet; a thin, dark mist was rising from the floor, and tiny shapes scurried beneath it, occasionally fluttering and chattering.
"More damn bats. What are they doing down there?"

Pausing, Gabe lowered himself onto a knee; there was no sense being afraid of getting bitten by something else now, anyway.
A little creature promptly ran up from beneath the mist to peer at him, huge yellow eyes set in a bulbous, horned head that its tiny body could hardly support.
It chattered and rasped, spreading a pair of wings that it snapped shut again after a few moments of display.

"Not bats."

"What, then?" Eva scowled. *"Gremlins?"*

Gabe sighed, slowly holding his hand out to the thing; it reached out in turn, touching his hand before giggling shrilly and bolting away again.

"...nothing."

The cave walls seemed to shift and sigh in the dark as they made their way deeper in, countless eyes watching from all sides.
The soft whisper of something breathing sharply just around the bend alerted Gabe; he stopped moving at once--
--causing Eva to crash into him from behind.

"Oh, *damnit!* I've had just about enough of you!"

Now it was Gabe's turn to ignore her words. Staring straight ahead, the color drained from his face-- and he spun on his heels to throw Eva back the way they had come, the wolves behind them suddenly appealing by comparison.

"n..no... *Eva,* RUN*!"*

"Wha--"

A massive, dark blur crashed into the tunnel, eyes blazing, fur bristling. It moved too swiftly for them; a swing of its powerful arms, and the pair was suddenly airborne-- soaring the *wrong* direction.

Gabriel landed on the hard stone floor with a painful thud; writhing painfully, dizzily, he tried to turn and see where Eva had landed, if she was hurt, or perhaps *what was going on...*

...but a paw landed atop his back, pressing him down hard before lifting away again.

"...Ee...*eev--"*

A piercing scream echoed through the cavern, and Gabe clenched his eyes shut tight.

This was what the wolves had been leading them here for; to feed their *alpha*, the most monstrous beast he had ever set eyes upon.
He didn't have the strength to stand and try to save Eva, or to even offer himself in her place; how utterly, disgustingly *miserable* to lie here so uselessly, to listen to someone else's end before suffering one's own --

"Time's a-wasting. Leave your playthings and come on," announced a deep, but singsong voice.

Gabe opened his eyes again, looking upward. He hadn't heard the man's approach over Eva's cries, even though he now stood only a couple feet away from him.

He couldn't quite make out his features, merely a few blocky shadows that made up the newcomer's clothing; a cape, wrapped tightly around his person, a cane...
... and a veritable *swarm* of the tiny, demon-like creatures crowded around his feet, all staring into the room with their luminous eyes.

Who was he, and what connection did he have with this... ?

Eva groaned softly behind him, followed by a soft scuffling of the beast's feet.
It strode past to greet the mysterious man, and the pair disappeared into the tunnel without another word.

"...Eva..?"

"I'm... I'm alright, I think. It bit me, but it... I don't think it's serious."

Gabe swallowed, his mouth dry. "Eva... I... I think that was..."

"A varworg, yeah."

Gabriel rose slowly to his feet, brushing himself off; his head was spinning.
Eva didn't seem like the sort to be fond of myths and legends, so he decided there was more danger in staying quiet.

"If it really bit you, Eva... yes. *Yes, it's serious."*

Book III Chapter 13: Mounting Tensions

Lab-Apartment 2136-F
Silent Rose Axl Branch
Axl, South Dreamsong

"It looks as though we're on our own in this. I'll find a cure, *I swear it."*

Gabriel Gaunthier quietly slid the door of his lab-apartment shut behind him, chewing on his lip nervously.

"On our own? Wh-*what do you mean by that?!"* Eva's voice was shrill and rasping-- it sounded as pained as she looked, curled onto her side atop his bed, her dark hair glued to the sweat on her forehead, her complexion unnaturally pale.

Through some small miracle, Gabe had managed to carry her out of the cave and back into the city (where he admittedly had to hire a carriage to bring them the rest of the way home).
Their lives had been spared due to the chance appearance of that strange, shadowy man-- but now time was of the essence, and everything seemed to be working against them.

He had just returned from an unsuccessful conference with his superiors; while they didn't quite laugh him out of the meeting room at the mention of werewolves, they were less than willing to humor his story.

"Are you certain it wasn't just a wild wolf? They can grow rather large in the deeper forests; just have your friend see the medic for a standard examination. She'll be fine," they insisted.

They were worthless.

"...I'll find a cure."

His eyes fell to the book he had left open on his workdesk.
The varworgge's curse wille come to fruition inne three dayes' time after suffering the bite.
Three days.

Gabriel grabbed his jacket, hurriedly slipping into it as he ran for the door.
"Stay here-- I have to find an alchemist!"

"Wh--where are you going? Gabriel? *Gabriel!!* Don't leave me here alone!"

City Hall
Gier, South Dreamsong

Elliot Christoph stood tall at the podium atop the City Hall's grand staircase, gazing out at the massive crowd that had formed below. Ever by her side, Cazwell paced back and forth, long ears laid back flat against his head, eyes darting.

He felt the eyes on him, hundreds upon hundreds, watching him, staring, judging him. He gritted his teeth a bit and puffed his chest, trying against his better judgement to at least stifle his bad nerves.

He had *never* been fond of large groups of people.

"Ladies and gentlemen..." Elliot began. "Our police force is hard at work searching for the people responsible for the recent murders. Our organization has been at their side throughout, and we believe we're a hair away from finding answers. In the meantime, however, we need everyone to abide by a set of guidelines to ensure the safety of yourselves and your loved ones.
"The city will be enforcing a temporary curfew starting at nightfall; all citizens will be expected to be indoors and secure by sundown, as we believe the vast majority of these attacks are happening at night.
"In addition, we urge all business- and homeowners to turn away anyone seeking shelter after curfew has taken effect; doors and windows should be locked, and no one should be on the streets--"

"How is that fair? What about those of us without a place to stay?!"

Elliot frowned slightly, reaching to adjust her glasses. "We have put considerable thought into the refugee situation. There are several shelters throughout the city that will be happy to take in anyone without a home for the night--"

"They're full! They're all full-- what are we supposed to do?"

"You just want us out of the way! We're foreigners, we're worthless to you!"

Cazwell narrowed his eyes and bared his teeth with a low growl; Elliot reached to gently set her hand upon his muzzle.
"We don't want anyone else to come to harm here, whether you're native or not. We're willing to open more shelters if it's needed, or you can perhaps try Axl down the road--"

"You think we're responsible for this, don't you? You callous *bitch!"*

The crowd exploded into a fury; chimaera struggled to break through, advancing slowly towards the stairs even as guards moved to block them. Frightened civilians began to scream and push to get away, a cacophony of fearful and angry voices quickly transforming into a dull roar.
Angry Sorilians began to throw bits of trash when they could, bellowing and snarling indignantly.

Elliot watched the scene in horror, her jaw agape as several officers rushed up the stairs to her side. "What's *wrong* with all of you?! We're doing the best we can--"

Suddenly, Cazwell stood on his hind legs and roared.

"You're all... you're all *IDIOTS!* Elliot doesn't care who you are or where you're from, she's just trying to make sure you all understand what's going on and how to stay safe! It's your own damn responsibility to do something about it-- what are you, a crowd of whining kittens?!"

"Caz, please, don't--"

"If you know what's good for you, you'll all shut up and start making arrangements for the night, or you can just stand around and stomp your feet and wait for the demons to--"

"--CAZWELL!"

In the few seconds of stunned, perfect silence that followed, Cazwell Christoph wondered to himself what being hanged from the museum flagpole by his throat would be like.

Book III Chapter 14: Making Headlines

SOMNAMBULIST LEADERS BLAME "DEMONS" FOR DEADLY SERIAL MURDERS!

HAVE TOO MANY SLEEPLESS NIGHTS LEFT ELLIOT CHRISTOPH DELUSIONAL?

CHIMAERA REFUGEES DEMAND JUSTICE FOR EXCLUSIVE SAFETY PLANS

GIER CITY POLICE ACADEMY EMBARASSED BY RABID SOMMY LEUPAK

SILENT ROSE AXL BUILDING RAVAGED BY MYSTERIOUS BEAST!

BODY COUNT IN GIER AND AXL RISE BY LEAPS AND BOUNDS -- WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

The Somnambulist's Office
Carl Christoph Museum of Science and History
Gier, South Dreamsong

"I'm so sorry, Elliot--"

"Please, Caz. Apologies won't do anything to help solve this case or take back what's already been said." The head of the Somnambulist Project threw a newspaper across her desk, sighing at the words printed across it in bold face.
"I still love you, but I'm still more than a little annoyed. You have to understand; we're brother and sister, but out there in public, anything that comes out of our mouths comes out of the mouth of *my organization*, and that reflects on *all of us*."

Cazwell laid his ears back and swallowed. "But those chimaera-- they couldn'tve been more wrong. Don't tell me we're not allowed to call them on it--"

"No, Caz... we're *not*-- and when it comes to hard situations that risk bringing to light forces beyond what the common person knows and accepts, those are right out, too. Yes, the signs are pointing toward dark forces, here... *but they can't be told that!*As it is, I hadn't even had a chance to bring it up to anyone who would know what to do over in the Police department. Now... well, we're a laughingstock, as well as being unfairly painted as bigots by the Sorilians. And even then... we have to get to the bottom of this and solve the problem. It's hard to swallow, I know..."

Elliot reached to wrap an arm gently around her brother's scaly shoulder.
Ashamed, he turned his head to gaze out of the office window and down into the street below, where several chimaera waved little picket signs, urging their fellows to leave their temporary jobs and speak out against the Organization.

Funny how they couldn't bring themselves to find safe harbor, but they found a way to gather supplies for protest signs.

"... wait. Elliot, what's *that?"*

Squinting through his glasses, Cazwell pressed a paw to the pane; several of the people on the street had suddenly thrown their signs down and scattered. Standing for a closer look, Elliot leaned in.
"Something's going on. Hang on, I'll--"

The phone rang suddenly, causing leupak and human woman to nearly jump out of their respective skins.

"Somnambulist Project Main Office, Ms. Christoph speaking... Yes... Yes, well, I-- That wasn't actually a ... Hold on, *what about the morgue?"*
The color drained from Elliot's face. Swallowing, she pursed her lips. "... they did *what?* Are you al--... yes. Yes, *I'll be right th*--"

"...Elliot, I don't think we're going anywhere. Look!"

Silent Rose Axl Branch
Axl, South Dreamsong

Gabriel smoothed back his ragged hair as best he could, sitting on both knees in the grass in front of the headquarters building, his clothes torn and flapping in the soft, chilly breeze.

His coat was in his lab-apartment.

His lab-apartment was, for the second time in his life and the first in his official career, in ruins due to no fault of his own.

He watched sullenly as people in armored suits rushed in and out of the building, sometimes followed by confused or frightened students and docs, other times alone and shaking their heads.

Nearby, his superior calmly smoked a cigarette, her lips pursed.

"So now you believe me."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Gaunthier," the woman sighed, glancing apologetically down at him. "The expense and rarity of the herbs and processes required to create a varworg antigen demands that we ignore any such claims unless they're backed by substantial evidence. It's Alch protocol-- not one I agree with, but I couldn't afford to help you out of my own pocket."

She shared a *besides, no one particularly cared for Eva anyhow* glance with him; he wasn't certain how he knew that was what the look meant, but there was little doubt in his mind, as though someone had planted that very thought in it.

A bit embarassed and a bit frightened-- he had heard occasional whispers among Docs that there were a rare few who possessed such telepathic gifts-- he looked away.

He worried deeply for Eva-- her frightening transformation and subsequent furious rampage last night had destroyed his lab-apartment, as well as several halls of the headquarters building-- but he was powerless, as powerless as one might suspect a brand-new Bio Doc to be.

"Well... what do we do now? Or... you, I suppose. The Organization."

"We step in," chimed a metallic voice.

In the noise and excitement of the moment, Gabriel failed to notice the approach of three new arrivals; turning around (and leaving a horrendous grass-stain in his trousers, no doubt), he found himself gazing up at a brass man and two leupaks; one, black-scaled and rather plain save an ornate headpiece, the other, perhaps the most massive and perhaps intimidating one he had ever seen, likely a solid three feet taller than he-- eight or nine total-- with a long neck, a black, hooded head that faded to tawny brown down the rest of his body, and a lion's tail striped blue and gold down to the tip.

His underbelly seemed to be crafted of massive ruby and sapphire plates lined in gold, his back covered in line after line of strange, apparently hand-painted characters that moved and changed as he tried to read them, like a book read in a dream.

The creature seemed to radiate authority from nose to paw-- the sort of authority with no qualms against mutilating anything so silly as to defy it.

*"....aaaah--?!"*Gabriel squeaked, in utter shock.

"You're Mr. Gaunthier? Great," said the black leupak. "I'm Sagarthay Felld-- this is Leonardo Alfonsi Two-Point-Five, and my superior, Houselord Sagarthay Anom."

"How do you do?" Said the robot amicably. "...Oh, yes. Call me Leo, if you like."

The massive leupak-- the *Houselord*-- gazed down at him. "...Gabriel Gaunthier."
The beast had two mouths, one stacked over the other, which spoke in unison in an echoing sound like the clang of rusted metal. It seemed to insist upon making eye contact with him, something Gabe wasn't certain he could stand terribly much of.
"You survived an attack by not one, but *two* raging varworgn within the span of four days," it began. "If I am not mistaken-- and I doubt I am-- you are, perhaps, the *luckiest bumbling bastard I have ever met*."

"Ahaha, um, than...thank you... sir? I... I think?" Gabe swallowed.

It grinned at him; Gabriel felt his stomach clawing desperately as far down into his body as it could reach.

"Your superior has already sent along information about you and your unfortunate situation. We are from the Main Branch in Laps; I am a Type-Two Automatonic Investigator specializing in supernatural forces, built by one Chief Engineer Na'than Silvermane. Lord Anom has considerable experience in the fields of Ancient Lore and Cryptozoology-- among many others, of course-- and he will see to your friend as Felld and I accompany you to the cavern you found the first wolf in, if you would be so kind as to lead the way."

Main branch? Automatons? Leupaks? *Cryptozoology?*
Gabe's head spun.
"...alright."

It wasn't as though he had a choice in the matter, anyway.

Climbing atop Felld's back after a moment's coaxing, the unlikely trio began to make their way towards the city outskirts, Leonardo's metal feet clanging melodically against the cobblestone ground.

Gabe turned to look back at the Headquarters for just a moment.

Sagarthay Anom stood perfectly still in the grass beside Gabe's superior, staring straight at him.
His two maws were smiling.

Book III Chapter 15: Two Sides of the Same Coin

Darkling Woods
Axl, South Dreamsong

SagarthayFelld and Leo II.V strode swiftly into the forest, Gabriel hanging tight to the shoulders of the black-scaledleupak.

Fog swirled at their feet-- a fog that certainly wasn't here a few days ago-- and Gabe shuddered, wondering to himself if his existence wasn't somehow cursed.

The lab-gremlins had been benign enough-- aside from destroying his lab the first time, and being made of miraplasm that he had known well enough not to touch bare-handed-- but now, being stuck in a pair with the woman who perhaps hated him more than any other being alive... and watching her *transform into a varworg?!*
It was simply *too much.*

"Perhaps I'm not cut out for this after all, he sighed. "I could become a bookbinder like Father wanted..."

"Well, bookbinding is a respectable trade--" Felld began.

Something inside Leo's head whirred. "Nonsense. Well, not about *bookbinding,* of course, but... you've come this far, why give up now?"

" When the world itself is trying to kill you, it's a good sign that you should stop whatever you're up to."

"To be frank... this is hardly the beginning. Every would-be Doc is tested, somehow, someday... yours just happens to be a bit more all-encompassing than most. But aren't you curious to see what your reward will be if you make it out on the other side?"

Gabe carefully ducked his head to avoid a low branch; In the distance, the cavern entrance loomed, seeming all the more foreboding for the fog and gray light filtering in from the trees above. "I'm almost afraid to know, to be honest.

"Don't give up-- you'd be doing yourself, and all of us, a great disservice," Leo insisted.

Gabe blinked. "...*All of you?* Why is that?"

"If my files on you are correct... even before you recieved your certification, you witnessed the generation of life from nothing. Since then, you've stared death in the face and dared to stand against it, as well as doing your best to cure the infirm, *without* the Organization's assistance-- and when that failed, you survived the aftermath, at point blank range, and here you are now."
It's not the Docs who sail through life with all the tools that become legendary, Mr. Gaunthier," Leo added. "It's the ones who *persevere* and struggle against the odds-- the ones who come to know the world at its worst as well as its best, and experience the things that others merely dream, don't you think?"

"We're here, I think," the leupak interrupted.

Gabriel gingerly slid off of the leupak's back, peering meekly into the mouth of the cave; several large black bats fluttered overhead.
Before anyone could move, a golden blur shot through the air, snatching one of the creatures up and yanking it into Felld's open mouth.

Leo seemed amused. "And how was that?"

"Looked better than it tastes, actually," Felld admitted.

Gabriel shuddered, deciding to trail behind the two senior agents as he grasped his queasy stomach.

The Iron Dungeon -- Cell 32-B
Silent Rose Axl Branch
Axl, South Dreamsong

Sagarthay Anom strode down the long corridor, stopping at last in front of the great double-doors marked 32-B. A tiny box sat just beside them; he placed his front paw on it, snorting faintly as the panel warmed uncomfortably.

"Houselord Sagarthay Anom requests entry."

With the squeal of old, rusty metal and the hiss of escaping steam, the doors pulled apart, revealing the metal-reinforced room within, empty save a small human woman curled in the far corner, her face hidden by her dark, curly hair.
Anom took notice of the deep gashes in the steel walls with a faint smirk.
Yes, this was the one.

Closing the doors behind him, the leupak lord made his way towards the sleeping Eva; the red markings on his shoulders twitched slightly before transforming into a pair of sleek arms, one grasping an ancient sceptre carved of bone.

Anom grinned maliciously. "Wake up, my dear. It's time for your checkup."

"...nnh...? ...*AIEEK!"*

Swiftly launching himself forward, Anom took hold of her by the throat with his free hand, pinning her unceremoniously against the wall before she could flee.

"Stop struggling so; it's unbecoming."

"What the hell is this, who--*what the hell are you?! Where's Gabe?!"*

"Out with a few of my companions; they'll return before long," Anom murmured. "We have business to attend, however. As an unfortunate consequence of your work-related injuries, you're now the property of the Rose. I'll need to perform a thorough examination before we can send you off to Main Headquarters for containment."

"...work-related..." Eva spat. "You... you bastards... just wanted to see what would happen to me if you left that bite to fester! You believed Gabe all along, didn't you?!"

"Perhaps, perhaps not. I wasn't made aware of the situation until you made a mess of the building. Either way, though... be a good dog, and *sit!"*

Holding Eva firm, Anom rose the scepter high above her, closing his eyes and uttering a guttural chant; immediately, his facet began to flicker and glow, softly at first, but gaining brilliance with each word.

Agony coursed through her veins like fire; pained and fearful, Eva kicked and shrieked at the Houselord, bucking and struggling to break free of his grasp even as sweat began to bead upon her forehead.

"What--no! No, stop!" Eva pleaded. "You can't fucking...d..do this to me! *My family will--"*

"I can, and *will*. I've been waiting a very long time to try the Scepter of Voghn for myself, you see. You just happened to bumble your way into becoming the perfect specimen," Anom gloated.

Eva clenched her teeth, her muscles straining and twitching beneath skin that had begun to sprout thick, black fur.
"I'll... kill you..." she promised. "I'm going to... paint the walls with... *with your...visc...viscer*...AAAAAAAAROOOGH!

Furious and murderous, a transformed Eva tore Anom's hand from her throat, lunging at him with blazing eyes.
With a wicked laugh, Anom spun, using his weight to hurl her across the room.

Slamming into the steel wall with a thunderous clang, Eva slid to the floor, drool pouring from her fanged maw.

"Ahahahah, brilliant! Absolutely brilliant!" Anom bellowed. "You're no Silvermane, but you'll be invaluable to our research and development department..."

With a low snarl, Eva rose to all fours, her claws cutting into the metal floor as though it were clay.

Book III Chapter 16: You're Invited!

Laps-du-Ment,Chimre

A smartly-dressed silisk rides down the street on his sturdy gray horse, carefully leaning over to attach fliers to streetlamps as he goes.

Ladies and Gentlemen
The Legendary Doctor's Ball is Coming
and YOU are invited!

Saturday, Octobre Twenty-Fourth to Saturday, Octobre Thirty-First
at the Laps Grande Ballroom
in Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Seven evenings of unparalleled delight with the world's greatest minds!

A grand celebration of science, discovery and dancing
hosted by none other than
Lord-Doctor Nefirian Dreamscar

Witness the most spectacular inventions, devices and exhibits ever gathered under one roof!
Meet world-class doctors, scientists and engineers!
Be among the first to sample and purchase new products and services!
Mingle with partygoers from all over the world!

ALSO

A great banquet equipped with seasonal finery is included;
sample the most delicious food and drink Valenth has to offer
in our elegant dining hall
or outside within our beautiful garden grounds!

Come in your finest dress--
but don't forget your masks!

Tame and trained pets welcome--
large animals leashed or harnessed, please!

SCIENTISTS! ENGINEERS! RESEARCHERS!
Interested in showcasing YOUR work at the Ball?
Visit the Grande Ballroom TODAY to register
450.00 per booth - 750.00 per room
Unbreakable Miranium Cages available for rent in several sizes;
ask for details!
Engineered to contain even the most fearsome, unruly beasts!
Available in cross-barred and diamond-paned formats--
perfect for hulking monsters and venom-spitters!

THIS IS THE ORIGINAL DOCTOR'S BALL,
THE ONE THAT STARTED IT ALL!
DON'T MISS IT!!

Book III Chapter 17: ...A Few Preparations

The Laps Grande Ballroom
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

A grand carriage crafted of a shining metal and white drapes pulled to a halt before the gates of the Laps Grande Ballroom, followed by a parade of prrbs and leupaks carrying supply boxes-- tied to their backs for the former, or grasped in their forepaws for the latter.

The carriage's driver slipped from his seat, opening the door for his passengers with a bow and flourish.

"Well, here we are. There's lots that needs doing before tomorrow evening."

"And we waited until the night before to do this... *why?"*

Nefirian Dreamscar gingerly stepped down into the street, tossing his hair back over his shoulders and pausing a moment to stroke the manes of the twin unicorns that had pulled the contraption. They were Anshe Proudhornes, a strong and sturdy breed domesticated by his ancestors ages before even he was born.

All of the legends about only female virgins riding unicorns-- and of course, they were always depicted as *rather slender ones, at that*-- only existed because the silly humans were jealous and needed an excuse as to why the single-horned equines were ill-mannered towards them.

Unicorns were meant to be servants of the fae, and they knew it; it was *just that simple*.

As Bast leapt unceremoniously from the carriage after him, the Doctor gave the larger of the two beasts a kiss on the snout; it snorted and stamped the ground, curling its long, leonine tail in response before rearing in display.

"Oh, Baroque... you are an insufferable showoff, you know that? ... And at any rate, we have today and until tomorrow afternoon," He said, finally responding to the other elf's remark. "It won't take that long to hang the streamers, set up the booths, all that sort of thing. The decorations are the easy part-- the sheer *brilliance* of this is that most of the people showing their various things off will do their own work, or pay us handsomely to do it for them!"

As Nef began to unpack, Bastion headed towards the front door of of the massive building to peek in, setting his box down on the floor and frowning. "It still needs cleaning, though... look at all of this dust! I'd help, you know, but..."

A pause. "I have allergies."

Accompanied by two prrbs and a rather large leupak, Nef paused to eye his husband standing in the dusty grand ballroom, carefully adjusting his monocle.

He was most certainly *not sneezing*.

"Oh, do you, now.... since when? Not that it's an issue-- here."

Handing the blonde a small paper facemask, the scientist slipped one on and set about directing the leupak into the huge, empty room. The creature was nearly twice as tall as Nefirian himself, with waxy, mottled blue and white scales and a puff of soft fur running the length of its tail.

It settled in the middle of the room, waiting patiently as the doctor began to open the windows. As Bast adjusted his mask-- wrinkling his nose a bit, as the things were so disproportionately uncomfortable for a bit of paper-- he watched as a small parade of prrbs made their way inside, carrying boxes atop their backs and pushing heavier ones in with their paws and heads.
The prrbs were as prone to exerting themselves for work as Bast was, but they seemed to have made a sort of game of it.

Finished and a bit exhausted, they gathered eagerly around their friend as he opened a bag of dried fruits and cereal to share with them, all wet noses and happy faces.

The last window opened with a slam. "There... now, give it a go!"

The mottled leupak grinned, closing its eyes and drawing in a breath of air that seemed larger than itself-- before releasing it in a great bellow of wind, lifting the dust from floor and walls like a gale.

Bast stuck out his tongue behind it. "That's cheating."

The blonde elf's husband threw his head back and cackled-- before catching a mouthful of lingering dust, gasping, then coughing for a moment.

Pleased after a few puffs, the leupak meticulously buffed the floor to a shine with the end of its tail before dipping its head in a bow and making its way back out with a wave-- stopping to pat Bast gently on the shoulder as it went.

"...I wonder if he's ever had an existential crisis," Bast muttered.

The room fell perfectly silent for a moment.

"Bast, darling..." Nefirian whispered to him. *"...your intellect is showing."*

"...Is it?" Bastion made a show of glancing around and behind himself for it.

Nef smiled, satisfied.

"That's better."

"Now, let's see... that's dusting done. Time to hang the streamers!" Nefirian announced.
"...What, we don't have a box unpacking leup?"

Digging through the boxes to unpack several rolls of shimmering white and golden fabric and a pile of balloons, Nefirian paused, raising an eyebrow. "Oh, come on, now. Don't tempt me."
"No, I want one! I'm tempting you!" Bast cried.

Pulling himself slowly from the crowd of happy, munching prrbs, Bast made his way over to help unpack, neatly piling things up for Nef to decide what to do with them.
Inflating the balloons for the displays, the scientist gently tossed a few over to the curious bears, smiling as they scampered to paw and bump them about.
"You're excited about this, aren't you?"
"I am. There are going to be lots of interesting people with interesting things, and it'll be fun-- and, well, it's just a little necessary. Revelry makes it harder for people to focus on suspicions for a while, and with people the world over coming for this, it'll buy us some more friendly

time with everyone while we... *prepare*."
Grinning ominously with a balloon between his sharp teeth, he opened a ladder, propping it against the nearby wall.

"Besides, Selarion and Ecleco will be here."
"What, he's performing? I thought maybe you'd get Lyri to do something... or did he do it last year? I don't remember. ...And Selarion won't even dress up, *fft*."
"He may perform a bit, he may just mingle. I'm leaving it up to him what he'd prefer... I did want Lyric to come and play," Nef admitted, "but... He's busy in Soril at the moment."

Bastion pouted, folding his arms across his chest with a sigh as Nef clambered up the ladder to hang the streamers and balloons as they spoke.
"...And oh, nonsense on Selarion, by the way. He dresses up every year!" the doctor added.
"As a *"gentleman"*. He's such a smartass."
"Oh, *c'mon!* It's brilliant--I love his sense of humor."
"It's *boring*."

Nef leaned backwards, balancing carefully to peer down at his husband. "Well, what are *you* going as this year, huh?"
Bastion dug around in a box for a moment before pointedly revealing a headband with two little bear ears attached.

"Of course-- how silly of me."
Grinning, Bast wiggled the ears at a nearby prrb who returned the gesture.
Nefirian turned, perching on one of the ladder steps with a pleased expression, dusting his hands. "There we go-- look at that! Lovely, hm?"
"Mmmhmm," Bast agreed.

Climbing down, Nefirian pushed the empty boxes aside on his way to the storage closets; something behind him gave a soft little *whumph*-- followed by the shuffling of big, clumsy paws and a shrill whine.
"Oh, no! Naughty prrb!"

The doctor turned to find one of the prrbs beneath a fallen streamer with its rump sticking out, confusedly prrbing and trying to remove itself.

"...well, it's not a Ball until a prrb knocks something down, is it?"

Book III Chapter 18: Sunset

Gier, South Dreamsong

Corpses stood within police-station doorways and atop mortuary stairs, watching silently with dead, sunken eyes as their former families and friends looked on in fascinated horror. They shuffled slowly into the light of day, inky fluids dripping from their leathery lips.

A young woman turned to approach one, crying its former name, reaching out for contact. Turning its head slowly, the dead creature's lips pulled into a grotesque smile.

Like a hunting beast, it suddenly burst into action, lunging at her with a shrill, hellish scream and unnaturally sharpened teeth.

At once, the others followed suit, taking to the streets on all fours, their grotesque maws wide open, black tongues hanging limply over deadly fangs.

The people of Gier scattered, screaming in terror and confusion; in an instant, they became a stampede, pushing, shoving, frantic to escape the scene before them. The undead circled and snarled like herding dogs, taking hold of fleeing people in their rotting claws, dragging them away from the flock one by one to feed in plain view, tearing into limbs and viscera with brutal joy.

The refugees of Soril took flight, roaring obscenities at the horror unfolding below. "Ghouls! Go home and get inside, *you fools!* Be grateful you have one to go to!"

A chimaera swooped past a figure perched atop a tall building, circling once before landing nearby. "This land is mad. I assure you, stranger, we will leave your home as soon as we are capable! I would rather die with the amol than be torn apart by the troubled dead!"

The man did not move. Silhouetted by the setting sun, his head was tilted downward in silent vigil.

Striding closer, the chimaera grunted. A lone gargoyle on a building such as this? "Or I'm talking to myself. Still, I meant every word--"

"This is not my home either, actually," a smooth voice announced. Before the leonine beast could so much as jump in surprise, the statue rose, grabbing him by the throat with fingers as sharp and hard as stone.
"But, since you seem concerned... they're not troubled, I promise. I ensured each of them was quite happy in their final moments of life. *Now*... they don't have any use for emotion; it'd merely get in the way, don't you think?"

"Demon! What business do you have with me?!"

The strange man clicked his tongue; his tone was calm, even amicable.

"Mmmm... well. It *would* be rude to devour your life's essence without even introducing myself beforehand, I suppose..."

Book III Chapter 19: Oh, What A Beautiful Night

Gier, South Dreamsong

Slow, sturdy footsteps beat a steady rhythm against the rooftops, *thump-thump-thump-thump*.

A pause; a turn.

Far below, a man screamed in a pitch typically reserved for the fairer sex as an abomination bit into his hip; just meters away, a mauled and bloodied corpse drew a ragged breath for the first time since its unholy rebirth.

The streets were boiling over with chaos and carnage, the living and the dead clasped together in a warm and loving embrace.

The stranger wiped his lip on the sleeve of his old green coat and smiled softly; the smile of a man who has opened his front door to greet his lady.

"Ah... what a lovely, perfect night this is! It's only a pity Fane couldn't make it... perhaps next time?"

He was curious as to the presence of so many chimaera; powerful fighters they were, but horribly out of place in Gier.
They'd cause a bit of trouble of their own-- even in the arms of death itself, they were too stubborn to surrender without a struggle.

He'd had an arm torn off by one once.
In return, he took one from it to use in exchange; it was only fair, after all.

Hidden deep within the roar of the frantic crowds and hungry beasts below, the stranger caught the faintest sound on the wind.
A sound like birdsong, like the steady approach of nimble feet through the woods, like a whispered promise of vengeance to come.

Kneeling carefully, he sat on the edge of the rooftop with his legs hanging down, folding his hands within his lap.
The wrinkles that decorated his weathered face told a tale of countless warm smiles through the years, perhaps unsuited for a fellow such as himself.

But *Nigel*, as he called himself these days, had never cared for the doom-and-gloom perspective so prized by his kith and kin.

He smiled once more.

"A storm is brewing, and change is heavy on its winds. Don't let me down, little god. Don't let me down!"

Book III Chapter 20: Under the Moon

Gier, South Dreamsong

"Listen, I don't care right now! The Sorilians are out there fighting for their lives and the lives of the rest of the city! Get some men out there and *do something!*"

Elliot sat in her deskchair with her face all but pressed against the glass of the office window, Cazwell settled on his haunches at her side.

With undead scouring the city streets, devouring and turning any poor souls they could bring down, the outlook seemed grim.
As she had just mentioned to the Commissioner over the phone, the chimaera of Soril had apparently decided to fight and defend their new-- and hopefully temporary-- home, using tooth, claw, and fist to beat back the cursed hordes.

But they couldn't possibly last for long fighting alone, and her heart ached for them.
"I sorely wish our brass prototypes were ready for testing. I can't *believe* this is happening..."

"We're not going to lose Gier too, are we?" Cazwell asked.

In the fading light of day, dark shapes skirted across the rooftops; two paused to stare and smile at the founder of the Somnambulist Project with eyes that flashed red and teeth like knives.

At once, Cazwell moved to guard his sister.

"...GET AWAY FROM THE WINDOW!"

Gabriel Gaunthier clung to Felld's mane for dear life as he rode atop the big leupak's back into Gier.
The howls of terror and fury drifting on the wind from within the big city did little to soothe his frenzied mind.

The automatonLeo II.V ran alongside at a breakneck pace, and Anom took up the rear of the traveling party, his twin maws shut tight.

"Why are we coming here again, exactly? And what about Eva-- is she alright?" Gabe asked.

Anom grunted. "Your little friend is fine; she's been called in for a visit to Main Branch. As for Gier..."
The Houselord swung a mighty paw, sending a ragged-looking fellow flying across the road; he slammed into a brick wall with a wet thud and an inhuman groan.

"...Dear *Doctor*, what was that for?!"

"Gabriel, look around you; we've come upon a warzone."

Gabriel's horrified gaze fell from the fallen man to the street before them, and he drew a sharp breath. "...what's wrong with all of these people? Why is there so... so much..."

"It would appear that we have a zombie invasion. Curious, that!" Leo announced with a surprising amount of cheer.

"...zombies?! Zombies aren't supposed to move like that!"

Anom laughed, an eerie, grating sound that stood Gabe's hair on end.
Striding ahead of the group, the Houselord plowed into the fray, tossing his great head and sending undead and living alike flying out of the way.

"Scribes change quite a few details of popular legends to soothe the minds of the impressionable public. Now, *come*; we must find a safe place to observe!"

"Observe? But aren't we going to help these people?"

Felld shook his head regretfully as he strode behind his superior, taking care to protect his human cargo from the rampage around them. "We haven't the means, unfortunately. For now, we record the events before us. I've little doubt that this ties in with our were in Axl somehow."

Sagarthay Anom leapt onto the rooftop of a low building like a great cat, hoisting his massive bulk up and taking a seat atop it. Felld swiftly followed suit, leaving his tail hanging from the side for Leo to climb in turn.

Apparently satisfied with his perch, the huge leupak suddenly sprouted a pair of red arms from the sun discs upon his shoulders, holding them out to the startled human.

A tiny lodica-- white and gold, and in the shape of a wasp-- lay within his palms.
"I--... ohhh... Is this the Organization model?" Gabriel gasped.

The Silent Rose had been quick to adopt the new lodica into their work.
Invaluable for correspondance between Main Branch and smaller branches throughout Valenth, the scientific organization had commissioned MIRACLE for a special batch of W-model lodicas with video-recording capabilities in addition to the standard voice.

All student Docs were to learn how to operate one as part of their primary exams; Gabriel wished with a little guilt that Eva were here to see him prove that he knew what he was doing.

"It is, indeed. Take it, and get aquainted with it. I trust you know how to work the video function?"

"I do, sir."

Carefully taking the mechanical insect in his hands, Gabriel focused its little eyes on the scene unfolding before them.

Nigel stood atop the highest building in the city, watching with a soft smile upon his face as his elite swept onto the scene to direct their new underlings.

Zombies were all well and good in small numbers, but they quickly got out of hand after the mortal casualties began to rise. They weren't pretty to look at or particularly enjoyable... but they were nothing if not loyal, like a good dog.

...If rotting in places, and missing a few limbs, perhaps.

Vampires, on the other hand, were often the reverse-- lovely, fun to deal with, and typically *whole*, certainly, but so very swift to turn on you if they decided they had the upper hand for some reason. Troublesome things-- but they always served their purpose.

He noticed a pair of them gazing hungrily into a nearby building.

"Oi, you! Stop mucking about and control your zombies! *Don't make me come down there!"*

The stragglers hissed their annoyance and turned to obey orders, grumbling through their sharp teeth.
Ah, *youths*-- they'd thank him when they were older.

A tiny glimmer of light soared into the sky at an arc, landing atop a zombie's head; the hapless creature burst into flame with a gurgling shriek, curling into a ball on the ground and vanishing into a pile of smoldering ash.

Nigel perked up immediately as the city streets suddenly flooded with *Aeneski*, clad in golden armor and robes, on foot and on stag-back; flaming arrows filled the air, along with shouts in Logos and Aengoch, the elves' ancient tongue.
The zombies immediately turned, rushing the newcomers with reckless abandon and howling cries.

"Ahahahaha, *here we are!* You couldn'tve been that far away." The old man threw his arms open and tossed his unkempt brown hair with a bellowing, jovial laugh. "*Firestarters*, welcome to my humble city! I am Ar-- *whoops.*"Slapping his hands over his mouth, Nigel paused to clear his throat.
"I am NIGEL, and we are the Brood of Chira! Let's have a bit of fun, shall we? We've got all night!"

As his vampires dropped from the rooftops in twos and threes, fangs, claws, and swords at the ready, Nigel--*as he called himself these days*--basked in the light of the rising moon.

Yes, tonight was a *beautiful night*...

Book III Chapter 21: The Legend is Real

They have been the subject of countless legends woven by the chimaera of Lucsus over the ages.
Huge, powerful and deadly, they move beneath the sands in packs, pulling their victims under and tearing them to shreds with sharp teeth and massive claws.

They are the Amol, and they are the Sorilians' worst nightmare.

Having claimed the chimaeras' ancestral home, they now search through the abandoned city for stragglers to devour.

But just above the surface, the sound of *wings* echoes through the empty desert...

Book III Chapter 22: A Hard-Rock Ballad, Part One

Soril City, Lucsus

"What a shame, seeing Soril like this... These guys, though... wow," Lyric'Ai breathed. "They're *ancient!*"

Deep within the shadows, a tiny, slender Aeneski sat, clad in a feather-ringed corset and a pair of worn leather trousers, one leg folded casually over the other as he watched the amol move through the once-mighty chimaera city.

Even with their great, armored backs hunched forward as they were, the amol had to be around eight feet in height-- *massive* for any vaguely humanoid race, even when you weren't quite as small as he was at a mere five feet, three inches.

He loved his parents with all his heart, but his results from the gene pool had been a bit... *awkward*.

Sliding down from his rocky perch, Lyric'Ai strode proudly into the city, right past the hulking beasts. He walked alongside one as it made its way through the streets of Soril, turning as it entered a building to stop and stare at another, face-to-face.

The creatures couldn't see him; the air seemed to ripple and shift around the Boralion *Heir* as he moved.
This suited him just fine-- as he'd whispered just moments before, the Amol were something old, something *amazing* even if they weren't terribly amicable.

In all his years, he had never seen anything like them. They had been made for a life tunneling under the desert sands; he had burrowed passages and homes under almost all of Valenth, himself, but he tended to use the rock tunnels the chimaera had sculpted in Lucsus.

He sorely wished to dive into the sands to discover these creatures' way of life, but he knew such an endeavor would only upset and anger them-- and rightly so.

The amol he stood before snorted loudly and shuffled away at last. Eager to find a place to relax for a moment, Lyri scampered into an abandoned shop nearby; cages full of tiny tiger-geckos lined the walls.
Making his way around the room, he found a bin teeming with beetles and carefully doled them out amongst the little lizards, sitting to watch them eat.

His stomach growled fiercely, perhaps as much out of envy as any real hunger.

"...I wonder if there are still carts around. I could have a bit to eat myself--"

"AMOL! IT IS TIME FOR YOUR RETRIBUTION!"

A familiar voice boomed far overhead, sending Lyric tumbling onto the floor in shock.

"What the...?"

Valdren?
What in Reverie was he doing here-- surely, he wouldn'tve come to win back the city for the chimaera's sakes.
They did more than a little heavy dealing in miracrystalline goods and less savory fare-- an arrangement made possible largely because of his father's influence-- and it was a situation the Firestarters were well aware of.

Did his brother intend to claim Soril for himself? *No*, Kelan would never allow such a thing!
Lyric made his way through the petshop, crouching beside the window for a look.

The amol had clustered into a group in the middle of the city-- and circling above were more Flarion than he could count, all with strange symbols painted over their eyes!

What was going on here?

A sobering thought suddenly flitted through Lyric's mind-- they intended to *raze the city!*

Thrusting a fist forward, he punched a hole through thin air, tearing at it with both hands and carefully flicking away the miraplasm that formed at the edges of the hole in reality.
Swiftly, he gathered the gecko cages two by two and slid them securely into the portal as Valdren bellowed overhead.

"YOU HAVE BEEN CORRUPTED BY THE MIRAJIN'S INFLUENCE. WE ARE HERE TO ENSURE THE TAINT CANNOT SPREAD. BY THE MIGHT OF THE RENATUS PURIFICO, MAY YOU BE PURIFIED!*"*

"By the might of the *what now?!*" Lyric whispered.

Having completed his work, the Boralion Prince stood to listen just a moment longer.
The little reptiles would be safe in the Reverie until he could return them to their proper owner, which meant he could focus on the problem at hand.

Why did Valdren think a race as old and pure as the amol had been affected by mirajin...and for that matter, *what the flying purple pegasus* was the Renatus Purifico?!

Before he could head outside to ask, however, a brilliant light began to fill the cavern-city, followed by the crackle of fire, the screeching hiss of angry amol and dragon.

Lyri threw himself into his portal, sealing it up with his thumb and forefinger just as the flames burst into the little shop.

He prayed that the poor armored beasts were as resilient as they looked.

"I can feel it, Wyre. It's far stronger than I anticipated!"

Valdren frowned; he had sensed it as well.
The mirajin was surprisingly powerful here-- more than likely, a result of foul, tainted goods stored within the city, meant for sale to all corners of the world.

The chimaera were notorious for black-market dealings of the worst kind; but the oppressive aura here meant they must've found a way to grow miracrystals themselves!

Such a horrifying prospect could only mean one thing-- the Silent Rose had finally sold their secret, which meant the Sorilians might be growing their own copy of the Fatis Mirajin!

"Casard, this place must be razed to the ground!" Valdren bellowed. "Great evil is afoot-- these poor beasts have given us the excuse we need to destroy it!"

The Renatus flarion flying beside and behind them hissed and spat in agreement as they wheeled through the subterranean rock-tunnels called the Soril Underpass, Valdren and Casarilinia in the forefront.

Oddly, however, the powerful aura Valdren and his second-in-command had caught wind of suddenly *vanished!*
The Flarion Prince growled.

"There's some sort of cloaking device guarding it as well, clearly. The entire city burns! I'll not have the chimaera return and continue their dirty work!"

The flock of Flarion burst into the great cavern-city of Soril, circling overhead as their leader bellowed to the swarms of odd, scuttling creatures below.

Marquise would have what she wanted, of course-- but here, now, Valdren would put a final and triumphant end to the Sorilian Trade Empire's nasty game!

"AMOL! IT IS TIME... FOR YOUR RETRIBUTION!"

Book III Chapter 23: A Hard-Rock Ballad, Part Two

Soril City, Lucsus

Soril City had been carved from solid rock-- a feature that guaranteed its survival against the Flarions' breath, even as personal belongings and silk banners burst into flames and were consumed.
The great cavern-city glowed red-hot for a few long moments...

And as the flames died away at last, as the Renatus dragons circled overhead like malicious vultures, they saw nothing but boulders lining the city streets.

Boulders that rolled forward of their own accord, and *uncurled.*

"These creatures... their armor is solid rock!" Casari cried.

Few of the amol had been destroyed in the magical fire; now they regrouped, turning their little neckless heads as best they could to glower up at their would-be attackers. "Stupid lizards. Always so stupid! Do you want *real* battle? Come closer!"

Valdren spat, turning to eye his flight. "They got lucky. Crush them or burn them alive, it makes no difference to me. Their remains will be incinerated regardless!"

But the dragons circled warily overhead, none daring to land in order to attack the swarm of amol below.
The Flarion were safe on the wing; they would undoubtedly be torn to shreds the second they touched ground, especially with their breath rendered useless by the amols' rocky carapaces.

They couldn't fly *forever*, though, and the amol were well aware of it. They waited patiently, flexing their claws slowly.

"Did you mishear me? ATTACK!"

Flarion dragons rained from the sky, belching fire even as they threw themselves bodily to the hard ground-- some managing to crush their foes underneath, others only succeeding in injuring themselves in the fall, leaving themselves at the mercy of the amol-- a concept that *did not exist.*

Casarilinia screeched her displeasure. "Fool, you send them to their deaths! Is our flight worth so *little* to you?!"

"Watch your tongue with me! " Valdren snarled, baring his fangs at his subordinate. "We have a battle to win-- these vile beasts must be dealt with, and the mirajin source disposed of!"

"I don't even sense it anymore," Casari sniffed. "We may not even be fighting the right creatures!

Valdren clenched his teeth and hissed; she was right, but he knew he had felt it here.
Such a massive energy source doesn't merely get up and leave...

Unless the mutants had tunnels deeper beneath the rock. "Regroup-- these things may be leading us into a trap! Find the mirajin!"

"Had enough already? Flying lizards are weak," the amol taunted from below.

Before either party could utter another word, a deafening shriek shook the cavern-city, followed by a high-pitched, wavering hum with a sound not unlike a chorus of ethereal voices.

"The source has returned, *Valadreni!* It's right--" Casari began.

A gargantuan Boralion dragon had appeared out of thin air, its wings hammering at the air to hold its bulk aloft.
The creature's scales had begun to turn into crystal over most of its body; the crystals lining its wings seemed to make the eerie, musical sound.

"I don't know what you're up to here, Valdren, but you can leave now," Lyric'Ai droned, his eyes falling upon his younger brother, wheeling forward to meet him on golden wings as the remaining Flarion circled around them.

"...I should have known!" Valdren roared. "Lyric--You're behind this!"

Lyric'ai opened his heavy jaw and bellowed. "And what is "*this*" supposed to be?"

"Don't play innocent with me," Valdren pressed. "Have you been seeking to mutate these beasts for your own purposes? Have you been supplying crystals to the Sorilians for their black markets? *ANSWER ME!"*

Lyric glanced at the amol gathered below, seeming eager for the dragons to drop from the sky and into their claws.

Even as he considered them, the Boralion Prince felt something tugging at his very essence, a familiar energy that Valdren should've scented *long* before his own.

Looking up into his brother's eyes, he immediately recognized its source. "...Valdren, I don't know what's going on and I'm not certain I wish to, but *listen to me!"*

The Flarion Prince paused, his expression tense. "Say something worth hearing, and I may. Go on."

Lyric'ai suddenly flew forward, grasping Valdren's shoulders in his great, crystalline claws, his eyes wide.

*"Get away from him!"*Casari shrieked in horror, but the old flarion female was ignored by the two brothers.

"Valdren... how were you so badly exposed to mirajin? Your mind is--"

Valdren tore away to land on a nearby rock, flames crackling upon his tongue."What the hell are you talking about? *I'm fine!"*

Lyric's expression softened. "No... you're not."

"I don't have *time* for your games, Lyric!" Valdren was indignant. " Marquise asked this favor of me, and I don't intend to let her down! I suggest you leave; killing you isn't on my agenda yet."

The Boralion ignored his brother's choice of words.
But *Marquise? ...*why would she...?

"These creatures may have driven the chimaera from this city, but that has nothing to do with you! Let them be and go home!"
Irritably, Lyric dropped to the floor. Lifting his claws high into the air, a single powerful slam cracked the hard stone surface open, revealing soft sand below. "You don't need to stay here and deal with the Flarion!"

The amol were unappreciative. "Always more of you stupid things! We don't need your help!"

The Boralion watched in furious astonishment as the sand-creatures surged through the crack he had made. Balancing upon his hind feet, he glowered up at his brother. " ... well, Valdren, either listen to me or don't-- I'm swiftly losing the will to care at the moment. But you're not yourself, and it's only going to get worse without--"

"I will find out why you were here, Lyric, and when I do, I will stop your charade once and for all," Valdren snapped, cutting him off. "Tell your father as much, as well. I'm not interested in idling by and letting you continue your campaign of corruption. Renatus-- we leave... for now!"

The Flarion circled around Lyric'ai's head before swooping off the way they had come. Casarilinia was last, taking a final worried glance back at him before hurrying to catch up with her superior.

"... I have had enough of these *ridiculous games!"*

The violet dragon's rumbling voice echoed off of the walls of the cavern, ringing in his ears.

Games, games... games...

Lyric narrowed his eyes; he owed Marquise a visit.

Taking hold of reality in his huge claws, he tore himself a passage into the Reverie and was gone as swiftly as he had come, leaving only a few droplets of shimmering miraplasm in his wake.

Book III Chapter 24: Slow Fade

Aqk's Peak, Schalle

"I... I don't *understand* what's happening to me."

Surrounded by the brilliant green of new sprouts and saplings fertilized with the ash of sacred flame, Valdren Flarion sat upon his knees, his head bowed, his eyes averted.

The old, charred remains of what was once a great forest had toppled, pulled closer to the earth by grasping vines and heavy rains; foliage and mushrooms now sought to reclaim the bones of what once was.

And amongst them sat the most magnificent bones of all; a gigantic bird's skull, dotted with wildflowers and imprinted with strange runes Valdren knew he did not carve.
The thing seemed to glow a soft white in sunlight or moonlight alike, and coming close sloughed his anxieties away like a shed skin, though something within him felt as though he had no right to approach it.

He knew something great and terrible had transpired here, an end as much as a beginning-- but it played on the edges of his mind, unwilling to come into the light.

An overwhelming dread filled him. "...rage. All I can remember is rage! Have I been lost within my own mind for so long? What madness is this?! WYRA!"

Swooping from the clouds almost at once, Casarilinia came to land at Valdren's side, dipping her head respectfully. "Valadreni... what is the matter? You seem troubled."

Rising shakily to his feet, Valdren threw himself against the dragon's scaly chest. "Tell me... what's happened. Why is no one here? Where have the Firestarters and my father gone? Why can I remember nothing of the past few weeks but fire and ash and voices?"
His soft elven voice faded to a quavering whisper. *"...what terror have I wrought?"*

Startled, Casarilinia stared down upon him as though he had gone mad-- perhaps not an inaccurate observation. "... you truly don't...?"

"It's there. It's all there, but I can't reach it," Valdren admitted solemnly. "I know I've done this... the Peak, the Renatus... But I don't know what *this* is! Answer me... please!"

"Milord, perhaps there was more truth to what your brother was saying than you care to admit," Casari offered carefully. "What happened to you before we found you? What business did you have in Chimre?"

Valdren gritted his teeth, pressing a hand to his face to quell his rising anger. These were valid questions-- questions he thought he had the answers to, at any rate.

"Wyra, I went to visit the Greatmother. When..." He paused, taking a moment to regain his composure. "...when I was but a hatchling, my father took me into the wilds to learn the ways of nature with him. She remained with my siblings and their fathers. I only saw her but a few times after that, and I wished to do so again."

The long silence that followed was maddening; it stretched on like an eternity.
Valdren swore he could hear whispers within it, voices urging him on, urging him away, *cursing* him, promising things he could only dream of, telling him what he must do...

Valenth needs you... it must be remade from ash, or it will surely die...

The people of this world cannot hope to understand the sacrifices you've made for them. Life is temporary, fleeting...

Demon! Hellspawn*! You have cursed this place you swore to protect!*

How convenient that the poor *Prince can't remember... or perhaps he simply refuses to confess to his own madness?*

Bide your time... wait for now. All you need is an opening, a moment of weakness... and then you can bring the civilized world to its knees!

Oblivious to his internal torment, Casari cocked her head. "... but the Greatmother... she lives beside the Mirajin itself, if the stories are to be believed! Valadreni, you didn't *truly*--"

"Shut up... Shut up, SHUT UP!" Valdren screamed, startling the old flarion who took a step back with an angry hiss.

"Do you desire my help or don't you, *Valadreni?* I needn't endure this treatment--"

Valdren was instantly apologetic. "...No, no, Casari... I didn't mean you. The...oh, oh *Opus help me...* ...did you *not hear them*?"

"... the Crystal has you in its grasp, Valadreni. There can be no other explanation."

Valdren's shoulders crumpled. Everything he had stood and fought for... was it now for naught?

When the threat of the Mirajin was first made apparent, he and his father had developed a foolproof method for deflecting its corrupt energy with one's own vitae.
It was a discipline passed down through generations of Firestarters, dragon and mortal alike, made all the more stronger by centuries of learning and development.

But he had not grown up beside the Crystal as his brother and sister had. It had been foolish of him to believe he could overcome its power at close range, or while he slept at his mother's side...

Opus...

And in an instant, everything came flooding back to him.
The lonely walk through the forests of Chimre, his reunion with his flight, the shadowy *thing* that dared claim to be his mother...

And that he had not only *fallen for it*, but done its bidding with grim, unwavering resolve.

Had it been a demon, or a creation of his own wounded mind?

"...Casari... everything I've done. Everything I've done, you've stood behind me."

The frightened dragon's voice was uncharacteristically soft. "Of course I have, Valadreni. You... you knew something drastic needed to be done, for us to finally begin healing Valenth--"

But in an instant, the wild Aeneski had transformed into a towering golden beast, eyes blazing; Valdren lunged, pinning her, snapping his jaws just inches away from her throat.

"WHY DIDN'T YOU STOP THIS? WHY DIDN'T YOU STOP ME?! The... the damned Crystal has affected my mind! What's your excuse, Casarilinia? *Tell me why I shouldn't slay you* right here!"

Struggling to get away, Casari's fluttering wing flung something small across the clearing; it tumbled away, bouncing against a nearby rock before rolling to a stop.

It was Kelan's skull.

Book III Chapter 25: Morte and Vitae

Gier, South Dreamsong

Gier had exploded into chaos, to put it simply. The newly-dead roamed the streets as zombies, lunging at anyone brave or foolish enough to come close, snapping with filthy maws to tear flesh and crush bone.

On the rooftops, vampires flitted through the shadows like cats, orchestrating the macabre scene even as they dodged and danced away from the Firestarters' flaming arrows. The bolder ones leapt down to engage those who would fight back head-on -- sometimes with more success than others.

And far overhead, standing atop the belltower of a tiny church was Nigel, that mysterious, scruffy old fellow, laughing and waving his hands like a delighted boy as his minions surged through the city and helen pipistrelles-- his bats, his *favorite* bats from his very own castle back home-- fluttered about in great swarms overhead, excited by all the blood being spilled around them.

There was something of an innocent twinkle in his eye, a heartiness in his laughter that seemed far out of place for anyone who might conduct such an atrocity.

But something *special* was on the way, and he knew in his heart that he had had a hand in awakening it-- just as Chira had wanted.

"Dance, my friends! Dance and feast! Tonight, we shall witness an event unlike any other, an event that has not been seen since the dragon-people lived!"

Stretching out an elegant hand, he reached out as if to cup the moon within his palm, and smiled.
The battle pulsed and roared on the streets below; it had become a beast in its own right, a hungry, furious thing that threatened to devour the city and everyone in it.

Fantastic-- more, *more*! Nigel's heart sang; it was only a matter of time, now. The truth was, he wasn't here to start a war (even though such a thing had come to pass, it seemed), or even to destroy Gier for the sake of doing it.

No, such things were simply a means to an end, an end far more important to the survival of Valenth itself than anyone there could possibly imagine. Vampire and mortal alike would give the ultimate sacrifice tonight, and indeed, some would understand why they gave it-- for their home, for their people, for the good of all, or reasons even more noble.

But things as they were now had to change-- it was *essential*, for the world was not meant to be run by mortal men--

Before Nigel could finish his inner monologue, everything went white, *blindingly white.*
He could hear the sounds of battle-- and something, many somethings screaming in agony-- but a sudden, roaring thunder abruptly drowned them all out. The building upon which he *assumed* he still stood trembled and shook.

The suns themselves had arrived to do battle; the light and heat was intense, and it dawned suddenly on Nigel that the screams were *his poor vampires.*

His eyes struggled to regain focus-- spots of color danced in them, blurring a new scene; burning zombies howling in pain and fury even as they continued to fight, lucky vampires who had found shelter from the sudden illumination clawing at their eyes, and unlucky ones strewn about the street, nothing more but smoldering ash and clothing.

"*What in the name of Lady Chira was* that*?!*" he gasped in amazement.

His only reply was a streak of fire-- *a meteor?*-- that plowed into him without warning, sending the confused old man careening through the glass windows of a nearby building, tumbling into a smouldering heap at Elliot Christoph's feet.

She screamed. "SHIT!"

Bruised, cut, and smoking, Nigel carefully rose to his feet, giving the human woman the most polite smile he could manage, considering the circumstances at hand."...ah, I beg your pardon, milady. *How do you do?* I'll pay for the window, gentleman's honor," he promised apologetically.

Horrified, Elliot kept her eyes on him; Cazwell bared his teeth and snarled.

"... who ... or what are you?" the human woman asked, wary.

"My name is Nigel. As for what I *am*..."

Something brilliant flickered and pulsed in the air behind Nigel, just feet away from the broken window-- Elliot's gaze fell upon it, and her eyes widened with shock.

"... he is a demon, and he *will NOT TAKE THIS CITY!"*

Held aloft by wings of living flame and circled by shining white phoenixes, Kelan Flarion pointed a massive golden bow at Nigel.

Elliot began to swear, but stopped herself; *Oh, Kelan* wouldn't be terribly proper in front of the Chapter himself, currently on fire or not.

"...ohohohoho, this is going to be better than I imagined!" Nigel laughed. "Look at you, all grown up! Come, let's *waltz!"*

Gabriel and company stared up at the great, flaming entity high above them in awe. "...that's what a Chapter looks like up close? They truly *are* gods!"

Even the double-jawed houselord was amazed; laying his ears back, Anom shook his head disbelievingly. "Incredible. The Flamekeeper.... has awakened."

Gabriel blinked. "Awakened?"

"The vital aura around him... do you see? He's practically *overflowing* with it. As though he were channeling it from..."

A sudden realization shook the leupak to his core. "Gabriel, the lodica! NOW!"

Fumbling with the little robot, Gabriel hurriedly handed it to Anom; taking hold of it in the eerie red arms that sprouted from symbols upon his back, he manipulated it with care, flipping the camera and speaker on.

"Houselord Sagarthay Anom from Gier City, Dreamsong. An urgent message for the Father-- we've located the missing Chapter, and there's something you must know, milord..."

Without another word, Nigel spun on his heel and flung himself from the window. Mid-fall, his body twisted and distorted, skin darkening to colorless gray, eyes glinting like stars.

Landing gracefully on both hands below, massive, black bat's wings sprouted from his arms, flexing and beating slowly as he smiled, teeth sharp and threatening-- no longer simply an old man, but a Viadante.

"Ahahahaahaha, yes, YES! You've finally got it, *well done!* I *knew* you wouldn't let me down, Flamekeeper!"

Kelan roared, his fury feeding the flames that whirled around him.
" ...do not TOY WITH ME!" Flaming arrows rained from his bow, each missing the dark creature by fractions of an inch, fractions of a second as Nigel neatly tumbled and rolled away.

"Ah, you're so serious! *Why?* You've discovered your dormant power... there's no need to rush this now. I'll teach you *everything you need to know, little god...*"

Book III Chapter 26: Farewell, O Cheerful Devil!

Nigel and Kelan wheeled through the night sky in more of an intricate dance than a battle; even now, the old Viadante was too swift, too agile for the Chapter to so much as land a blow on him again.

He had the element of surprise the first time; now, it seemed, his opponent was all too happy to remind him of the difference of power.

"Centuries in the making, my friend... that's what *you* are. It's only a pity it took such a jarring experience to do the trick..." Nigel purred, as cheerful as ever.

"What the hell are you talking about?!"

The demon tucked his wings in and folded them behind his head, using his magic to drift for a moment or two. "The origin of your original power was an... *accident* in and of itself, yes. But nothing is *truly* accidental... the Fatis Mirajin was meant to be, just as the Eye of Elysia was, aeons before it-- and just as you were. It's funny how fate works, isn't it?"

Kelan's eyes narrowed with fury; in a bid to take advantage of Nigel's apparent carelessness, he gathered his energy and fired off a blast of flame at the creature... but again to no avail, as he simply tumbled aside, giggling.
"Do you want to know what's funny, demon?" the Chapter snapped. "I'm not interested in playing friendly with the likes of you! You don't just kill, you pervert the very meaning of *life itself!"*

"...you're right, that IS funny! Is it *truly* so cut and dried as all that?"

The grinning Viadante suddenly appeared just beside Kelan, his eyes sparkling, his tone as conversational as ever.
"Tell me, if vitae was so perfect in its "natural" state... *why* is deviation even possible? If vitae is supposedly the only natural element... why do morte and mirajin exist at all? Elements are pieces of the world, parts of what makes it whole... not something that can be crafted at a whim by anyone!
"And for that... I think perfection is a matter of opinion, personally-- often an opinion that leads to stagnation and decay in and of itself. Even in a natural world, free of meddling sapient beings, mutants can and do come about, and those may even be heralds of something new, something *greater*... surely your scientist friend has taught you as much--"

"*HE'S NO FRIEND OF MINE!* And that's a humorous argument from someone who manipulates an artificial element harvested from *suffering*, at that!"

This gave Nigel pause; he rose an eyebrow. "An...*Artificial* element? Oh, *Kelan*." Nigel frowned, scratching his cheek. "Willing something to not be true doesn't change it, not in the Waking realm.
"*Blood*, for example, exists in creatures, within, practically unseen until a wound is caused, some pain or, one might argue, *suffering* is inflicted.
"Does that mean that blood is a *false substance*, or that the creatures that require it to live, be it to course through their veins or as a source of food, are somehow *corrupt?"*

"Wha-- that's a ridiculous argum--" Kelan began.

"Is it really? I'll let you mull over that for a while, though; I have an appointment with someone else now. *Ta-ta!*"

Before Kelan could react, the gray demon grasped him, gave him a peck on the cheek-- and then promptly exploded into a cloud of tiny black bats, flitting around the Chapter's head.

Kelan roared, hurling balls of fire at the creatures.
"You cowardly, venom-tongued bastard! I'll find you! I'll find you in Hel and slay you there if I must!"

Nigel's voice drifted on the wind, hollow and eerie.
"Ohoho... I'd advise against that, little god. You've only *just* earned your wings... now, you must learn to use them. There are far more pressing matters for you to deal with than I...."

As the bats scattered and the demon's last words drifted away on the wind, the fiery aura around Kelan began to dim.
He was high above the world, and a fair distance from Gier; he hadn't noticed how far they had flown during their discussion.

Was Nigel leading him away from the city on purpose?

Fury renewed, Kelan shot off back towards Gier again, Nigel's words ringing in his head.

Morte was an unnatural substance, even more perverse and destructive than the Fatis Mirajin's corrupt energy.
Harvested from the vital essence of tormented creatures, it was an essential tool of necromancy, capable of inflicting great evils upon the living and dead alike...

But wait... the *Eye of Elysia?*
What was the Eye of Elysia... and why did the old creature compare it to the Mirajin?

Was it another crystal?

...was it the first?

Book III Chapter 27: Calling You

The Reverie

He calls to her in the dream world, as desperately and plaintively as any young creature in distress. Over and over and over again, he cries for her, and Opus tries to call back, to let him know that she is here... but the calling continues, and he doesn't hear her.

Here, where people dream and let the non-waking part of themselves move freely, Opus is used to having almost total control of her surroundings. Seeking people out, listening to their pain and, through sheer force of will, soothing them as only a devoted mother can.

Only one calls to her *by name*, and her poor chick's been doing it all his life...
...and so why, now, can she *not reach him?*

She sees him there, in as much as it's possible to 'see' anyone in this dreamscape - a flickering beacon, like all the others and yet, entirely unique, blinking in and out of existence as he battles with whatever inner turmoil is causing him so much grief.

When she comes upon such beacons, she holds them to her chest and listens, and understands, and fills them up with all the good feelings they need in order to know peace, if only for a moment. She thinks of them like bowls of water. Sometimes they grow empty, and it's her self-appointed duty to refill them.
Valdren's bowl, however, is out of her reach, though she stands within touching distance of it, listening to each cry. Every time she tries to hold it, she feels herself being pushed back, and it hurts, both emotionally and physically.
She's never been hurt in the dream world before.

She doesn't understand.

He's calling.

For the third day straight, the Erosion pair charged with watching their mother looks on as she stirs in her sleep, and the little chicklets popping into reality are not of their typical soft coloration.

These are a deep, burning shade of *orange*, glowing faintly as if lit from within, and no sooner do they appear and take a few curious hops...

...do they disappear in a *puff* of smouldering ash, and cease to be.

Book III Chapter 28: Aeneski of a Feather

Gier, South Dreamsong

"You've done well, my *kian dri*. You've done well. Set up camp around the borders and watch for any stragglers; I'll be with you come morning."

Kelan Flarion saw that the undead forces had all but crumbled without their masters' influence; at "Nigel's" departure, the vampires had fled, leaving the zombies to amble about without aim or purpose, making them easy prey for the Firestarters and company.

The Viadante had been interested only in coaxing him forth, nothing more.

As he landed, the flame aura flickered and died away, leaving his skin steaming in the cool autumn evening.
Giving orders to his rangers to help clean up, see to any survivors, and guard the city outskirts, he made his way down the city street-- a path he knew well, one he had traveled for many years now, even if the number was insignificant to the *Aeneski*.

His presence on this world now, he knew, was anything but insignificant-- *miraculous*, perhaps.

With a deep, weary breath, he made his way up a small flight of stairs to knock firmly upon the door of a small townhouse, waiting patiently.

A tall, distinguished looking elf answered before long, looking somewhat frazzled with her greying hair tied into an untidy knot, her thin lips pursed.
At the sight of Kelan, however, she seemed to soften, opening the door fully to let him inside.

"A moment, I'll alert the master. It's good to see you again, sir."

"And you, as well," he replied politely.

With that, Kelan dropped onto one knee before the door, closing his eyes to catch his breath as his strength seemed to drain from him at once; his muscles ached and burned, his head swam.
As the old servant woman turned to enter the house once more, Kelan was dimly aware of soft piano music drifting outside; it stopped before long, followed by the sound of footsteps, steady at first-- but becoming hurried after a brief pause, stopping just before him.

Kelan opened his eyes as strong arms helped him to his feet.
"I was beginning to wonder if you had forgotten about me, *mis roiathe*. Are you alright?" came Selarion's smooth voice.

"Forgotten you? *Never*... though, I'm not certain if I'm alright. I'm certainly *alive*, however."

Helping the exhausted Chapter into his home, Selarion calmly took note of his feathery orange wings with a raised brow.
"I... don't recall you being able to fly before. *Interesting*. Do you wish to talk about it? Or would some sustenance and a warm bed suffice for now?"

"I'm happy to tell you everything I remember-- there's quite a tale in it, I think."

Selarion gently guided Kelan to a comfortable seat before taking one across from him, resting his elbows upon his knees.
"I suspected as much."

Taking a moment to gather his thoughts and relax-- a sensation he had long forgotten-- Kelan carefully adjusted his wings behind him.

"...I feel I should begin with the most significant detail here," the Chapter spoke slowly. "I apologize for having been away for so long-- initially, it was only a temporary measure to avoid leading those who meant me harm back to you. Unfortunately, I was... *killed* in the process."

Selarion blinked. "...I fear you've lost me. 'Killed'? You look alive enough to me."

Kelan nodded slowly, choosing his next words with great care; he was uncertain of them, himself. "I... believe I've... reincarnated, in a manner of speaking. Whatever is the case... I was definitely *slain*, and my remains burned."

In actuality, he had been very much *burned* alive-- but there was no need to traumatize Selarion any more than necessary to tell his tale.

"What happened? How were you brought back?"

"I... believe Valenth itself had something to do with my revival. I'm not certain if I simply have unfinished business to perform, or if I simply... wasn't meant to stay there, for now or at all. But Valdren killed me, at the Peak.
Aqk first, and then me after I tried to save her..."

Kelan fell silent, great pain apparent on his face.
Shaking his head sadly, Selarion reached to pet his shoulder consolingly. "I fear he's moving beyond redemption. To do such a thing..."

Kelan's voice was rough. "He's gone mirajin-mad; I'm certain of it. After he killed Aqk, I tried to return his vitality to the earth, but it began to crystallize the area around us. I couldn't continue, not like that-- and so, he turned his breath on me."

"To actually succeed in killing a Beast-God, and a Chapter... what do you hope to do now? He's a dangerous element... Perhaps my question should be, what will *he* do now?"

"Believing me out of the way now, he'd no doubt start making plans to attempt an attack against Chimre." Kelan said. "Ordinarily, I'd dismiss such an idea as impossibly foolish, but considering what he did to *us*..." He shook his head. "He needs to be neutralized, his faction removed. I can think of one sure way to do so, but..."

Selarion couldn't help but feel a bit powerless, frustrated at his inability to help.The moment quickly passed, though, and he frowned. "How?"

"A temporary alliance. Mark my words, I hold Nefirian ultimately responsible for this, and I will deal with him myself in due time," Kelan admitted. "But Valdren is a more immediate threat."

"...You think he'd agree? You hardly left each other on good terms last time, and I know how stubborn you both can be." Selarion tried to word it delicately, but there was no escaping the fact that the two Chapters were both incredibly hard-headed with each other.

Kelan wouldn't dare lash out at Selarion, however, especially not in the face of his hospitality. "I have no choice but to suggest it... and no, I don't know if he would. But he must see the looming threat, nonetheless, and he is not known for his fondness of war."

Selarion agreed. "No, indeed not. I suppose it's worth a try, if nothing else. ...I'd feel better if you took a moment to rest first, though. You look like you need it."

Glancing at Kelan's wings again, the old elf gestured to them. "Do those... go away?"

Kelan looked sheepish, spreading them in a shrug. "*Go away?* I'm... I'm not certain. I don't know what form I have returned as, only that it is... myself, and yet *different.*"

"You're... *molting*. A little.'

There were downy orange and white feathers all over Selarion's chair. Mildly distraught, Kelan turned to pick futilely at them.

"...I'll send Wren to your room to help you get them straightened out. I don't believe you've properly met yet."

"...I'm... molting," Kelan repeated in slight displeasure and made a face; this would take some getting used to. "You've a new servant?"

"In a sense. My buyer for the harpy shipment fell through, and only wanted the adult female, since she assumed the young male was her chick, and she wouldn't be able to breed them. I was reluctant to send the youngster off elsewhere, with so many unknown variables... and so he remained here.
"I'd have mentioned that to you sooner, but... well. I wanted to make sure there was something worth telling you about first. He's coming along nicely - I expect he'll know exactly what to do with wing feathers, at the very least."

"...a harpy, even. Fascinating-- I haven't seen those since I was mortal," Kelan said, forgetting his plight for a moment. "Well, I look forward to meeting him... for *several* reasons, at that.
"These things itch."

Book III Chapter 29: Legend of the Rose

The Seaside Inn
Axl, South Dreamsong

"Room service!"

"Ah, cheers! Come on in."

As the weary young woman pushed her cart into the hotel room, her eyes naturally fell upon the man seated upon the bed, casually lighting a cigar as he listened to a radio show.
New stubble dotted his chin, and a silver chain worn just under his shirt caught the fading light of the twin suns through the half-open window, proudly displaying a picturesque scene of Axl from a bird's eye view.

Hidden from view, an S-class dreamshard was suspended from the chain.

This was Doc Samson, an SRO oldtimer, though no one of particular interest unless you were one of a few small groups of people. Certainly, an innocent lass like her had no reason to know so much as his name.

Samson flashed her a tired smile, which she returned in full as she poured a hot cup of tea for him and sat his meal upon the nightstand.
"Yer a far way from Main Branch, sweetie. Business or pleasure?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," he admitted, glancing down to check that his dreamshard was out of sight; perhaps she'd made it out under his vest somehow. "I'm just here for the view... I've heard it's lovely in Axl this time of year."

"Sure, sure. Sorry-- didn't mean t' frighten ya. What d'ya think so far, then?" Her Faerwethr accent rang in her own ears; it was harsh and jarring, a curious twang for a human girl to carry.

The oddity was far from lost on the senior doctor.
"It's... not bad on the eyes. A bit rough and tumble in parts for my liking, but it's a change of scenery. What's your story, then? You don't look much like a silisk," he laughed.

"Ah, nah," the serving girl admitted. "Jus' grew up around 'em, thassal. Y'know the story... Faerwethr orphan, got sent off by me folks to find a livin' around m'own kind when I was old enuff. Y'dun mind, d'ya? 'Ere's yer tea."

"Oh, no, no. Just not something you come across every day, back home. Is it common here in Dreamsong?"

The Doc gratefully accepted the teacup, setting his cigar aside to take a slow sip.
The serving girl waited patiently for him to finish; as he pulled the warm liquid into his mouth, her eyes seemed to darken to an uncanny shade of red, her lips pulled towards the side of her face like an ugly gash.

Startled, Samson dropped the cup; it shattered, splashing ceramic shards and tea across the carpet as he flung himself backward onto the bed.

The girl was atop him faster than he could urge his muscles to move; his mouth had already begun to prick and tingle; whatever drug the tea had been laced with was swift, but meant only to subdue.
She glowered down at him with her magenta eyes and a smile full of daggers, one foot propped hard against his chest, her hands gripping his collar with frightening strength.

"Doctor Carlisle Samson," the demon-girl hissed in a smooth, male voice with a perfect Laps accent, "Did you truly believe we wouldn't find out what you were up to? Did you think you'd get away with it? So messy, so clumsy for a rose, and risky, too. Making deals... with *Renatus*?"

Samson was a *Vital Doc*-- specializing in research of life-energy, mirajin's effects upon it, and vice versa.
An uncommon field of study in the SRO, Vitals were prized members of Chimre's scientific community-- most people interested in such topics were found in the Firestarters or similar groups, for obvious reason.

Samson's work was not his own by any stretch; he collaborated with several other docs from various fields, including Bio, Cosmo, and even an occasional Correctional Doc.

Regardless, he had been part of the Organization for many years; moving up through the ranks, he had access to classified information reserved for high-tier members.

Some of which he had recently seen fit to share with the *Renatus Purifico*.

"Ho... how did you find...?!" Suddenly, cold realization gripped the doomed man. "N...no! Y-y-you... *can't be*," he gasped, short of breath, scrabbling against the bed with curled, numb fingers.

The creature opened its mouth, a long, terrible black tongue curling from it, claws sharp and dripping with venom that resembled honey in both appearance and scent.

"I *am*, Doctor. I am Anderson, and you've breached your contract-- I'm afraid this is your *termination notice*."

Book III Chapter 30: White Symphony

The Swanheart Cosmo-Firm
Laps-Du-Ment, Chimre

Rosepetals and snowflakes by the thousands swirled round in great, windy puffs past the massive windows of the Firm building, accenting a breathtaking scenery of white streets and white buildings and glistening golden towers.
Laps was at its best this time of year; Chimre's petalfalls were all but legendary, turning the country into a scene out of some whimsical dream.

That was, in Dr. Dreamscar's opinion, *precisely the way it was meant to be.* Glancing up from his paperwork for a moment, a smile graced his lips.

"It's difficult to believe there could be unhappy circumstances in a world as lovely as this.
"Unhappy thoughts, unhappy actions, unhappy *circumstances*... people without the means to enjoy the fruits of their own hearts and minds, even if only for *a little while.*"

He studied the document before him-- it was a client's file, one of many that made its way to various hands in the Firm, documenting in painstaking detail the desires of a potential patient looking to have *Cosmo* work done.

Dearest Docs of the Swanheart Firm,
I no longer wish to be Aeneski, or my current self.
My ears are too long, my eyes are too bright, and my stature too lithe. I feel misplaced and noticable within the crowds of Dreamsong.
I would like to request a racechange into a human, as well as a physical overhaul and revamp. I have heard the world over of the calibre of work you do here, and have full confidence that you will sculpt me into a work of art.

I am willing to begin offers at 85,000 krus, and would not balk at the price well rising beyond that.
I am prepared to pay well for your time, should you accept my request.

Nef skimmed the rest of the paper, his green eyes glinting in the soft light of snowfall.
It was a relatively simple and riskless procedure, compared to the usual fare; none of the other Docs in Swanheart would likely be interested in taking it.
Shaking his head lightly to toss his hair from his eyes, Nefirian signed his name in wide, graceful letters at the bottom of the document.

"You shall be a work of art, indeed-- a tiny bit of ethereal beauty in a world of simple and unexquisite beings. How that will help you blend in, however... mmm, that's the question, isn't it?"

With a soft laugh, the rotund scientist rose from his chair, documents in hand; carefully rolling them into a little decorated tube of gold and crystal, he sent the parcel down a chute towards the ground floor and the secretary's office.

It wasn't his place to judge this poor fellow, though.
If in the end, he was pleased, then his work would be done, and the entire Firm would benefit for it.

His work complete for now, he moved to stand by the window and watch the *petalfall*.

Book III Epilogue

Westcove, South Dreamsong

In the dim light of Valenth's single moon, dark shapes crawled dutifully over a moored ship, their eyes glinting feral shades of gold and green, their fanged mouths issuing snarls and grunts and sharp barks to one another as they continued their work.

Silently, a winged creature perched atop the crow's nest; it paused for a moment to fondly admire the grinning skull upon the flag above before leaping unceremoniously down onto the deck.

The immediate starting of the wolf-men did nothing to frighten him, nor did the lifeless former crew-members strewn like meaningless junk over crates and against barrels.

Hostile werewolves be damned, all Nigel could do was smile approvingly as they circled him, teeth bared.
This lot had taken quite some work to find, but now he could finally get on with things.

"Captain, old boy! I've got some interesting work to offer you."
Striding forward boldly on all fours, the black werewolf lifted his head, growling in annoyance.

"Now, now, there's no need to be cranky," Nigel added sweetly. "If we play our cards right, we can have your old Master back before you know it. You'd like that, wouldn't you? Aww, *wouldn't you, puppy?* Yes, you would! I know!"

Lifting onto his hind legs, the wolf laid his ears back and snarled furiously.

"Don't bite me, don't bite me!"

Dreamsong Evertunnel
The Subterranea

Lyric'ai snaked his way through the Evertunnel, weaving around chunks of old miracrystal and the occasional aetherhole.
Having traveled for a while already, he longed to settle down within one of the many caverns branching off from the boralion-dug tunnel system-- but *not yet*.

He should have been nearing Jetersborough by that point; a few more hours, and he could pay his sister a visit.

Then, he could rest.

Weary-eyed, he dimly registerred the presence of other beings-- much smaller than he, and cloaked perfectly in the tunnels' darkness save for tiny specks of colorful light, like distant stars-- slipping into the waking world from the rifts as he passed.

Finally, the great Boralion came to a stop, bowing his head respectfully as the shadowy, sparkling things gathered at his feet, chattering in a language that they both shared.

"You're a long way from the surface, friends-- but welcome to Valenth. Where do you need to go?"

The Emery Lounge
Gier, South Dreamsong

Cazwell Christoph's nose pressed against the table as he reached for his drink.
He hadn't quite figured out the best way to solve the issue of chairs since his transformation; he wasn't terribly fond of sitting on the floor of a public place, but the Emery was cleaner than most, at least.

Sliding his tongueclaw into his glass, he winced a bit as the bubbly soda-water stung it and made his throat burn just a little.
"These guys are pretty good-- it's been too long since I left the office for the fun of it. What do you think, Caz?

The brown leupak's ears twinged a bit.
His sister wasn't truly addressing him; he giggled faintly as he followed her dreamy-eyed gaze to the big band and singing duet on stage-- and the jauntily-dressed fellow of the pair belting out songs, in particular.

"I think you're giving Hans funny looks," Cazwell noted.

Elliot's cheeks grew red.
"Wh-- I am *not!"*

Axl, South Dreamsong

Gabriel awoke in a cold sweat, gasping.

Fumbling weakly for his clock, he leaned over, pushing the windowshade aside to let the moonlight in.

11:15.

"...dammit."

His head was practically humming with activity; for all of his struggling, he had only managed a good hour or so of fitful sleep-- even then, his dreams had been... off.

Gremlins, imps, werewolves, zombies, vampires, leupaks... *Chapters*.

In the faint light of his bedroom, Gabe felt overwhelmed and lost.
He was ready to blame all of his bizarre experiences on the Organization-- but then, virtually none of them had had anything to do with it, had they?

With a resigned sigh, he sank into his flat pillow and closed his eyes again, feeling the cold weight of his dreamshard atop his chest.

"In a world like this... what keeps us common folk from being swallowed up whole?"

As he drifted slowly into sleep, the shadows of Gabriel's room crawled out from beneath his bed and over his walls, whispering as quietly as the scratching feet of rats.

Book IV Prologue

Peaceful Rest Funeral Home
Axl, South Dreamsong

"Today, we mourn a life taken from us far too soon. Eva Santora was a brilliant young woman, full of life, joy and promise for the future..."

The suns shone brightly in the sky, setting the light dusting of snow on the ground aglow; the day itself was as brilliant and lovely as one could hope for in the middle of Winter-- a fact that seemed like a personal insult to Eva's family and friends at her funeral.

The letter had come amidst the chaos of the attacks in Axl and Gier; a formal notification from the Organization that had likely been sent to hundreds or thousands of other families, identical save for a simple change of name.
The shock had not been within its words, but in the form of a tiny silver locket that Eva had always kept close at hand, usually tucked away within a pocket if not worn around her neck.

It had tumbled from the folded letter as her mother pulled it from the envelope, and the message contained within was immediately clear.

Now, her parents stood side by side and hand-in-hand, her mother sobbing a stream of tears that seemed endless, her father stoic, silent, and grim.

"She had only just gotten started," Angela Santora moaned, dabbing at her made-up eyes with a handkerchief snatched from her husband's suit pocket. "She had only just gotten started, there was so much she needed to do..."

The corner of Doctor Santora's lip twitched lightly, but he remained silent.

Book IV Chapter 1: Faerwethr Friends

Lukh River
Faerwethr, North Dreamsong

The humidity was thick enough to cut with a claw thanks to the massive pools of water she was now plodding heavily through; had she been a member of the soft-skinned races, sweat would've been pouring from her at a magnitude sufficient to add another inch to the waterline, perhaps.

But as a silisk, this was her element; this swamp was Harley's home, and she was delighted to return to it at last, after many long months of traveling across the world.

A shimmering blob of color flew through the air past her nose; unafraid, she lifted a four-fingered hand to catch it before it landed in the murk below.

A frog; tiny and vivid in hue, with silver eyes like two bubbles breaking smooth water.
It blinked, it croaked, and with a flick of its powerful legs, it was gone.

Harley laughed, her voice a deep and grating rumble low in her chest. At once, she broke into a run across the shallows, passing schools of glimmering fish, upsetting insects of frightful size, and even drawing the temporary ire of a nearby crane.
"You're alright, I'm almost out of your way!" She called cheerfully.
The bird squawked an insult at her before returning to its fishing, clicking its beak and grumbling as the silisk continued along on her way.

In the distance, wooden bridges and platforms nestled among the great cypress trees, swarming with people-- her people, family, friends, and the leaders of their community whom everyone held dear.
Her powerful legs carried her swiftly through the brackish waters, over fallen logs and driftwood, around rocks and away from lurking basilisks-- massive and dangerous beasts whom the silisk had always shared the swamps and marshes of North Dreamsong with.

At last, she began to slow, breaths coming in soft puffs from between her scaled lips.

At last, she had come close enough to the city of Faerwethr that people had begun to take notice of the single violet silisk making her way ever-closer, bags slung over one powerful shoulder.

And at once, the entire city seemed to explode into excitement and commotion, voices crying out in surprise and joy, friends and fans leaping past the little tipsy-houses and into the water in twos and threes to greet her with smiles, waving hands and outstretched arms.

"Mum, da! Everyone, gather 'round, I've got so much to tell you!"

The celebration lasted well into the evening, hundreds of silisk gathered around the great Bonfire beneath the the maw of a gigantic wooden alligator-- in homage to their Father, the creator and guardian of their people.

Dilndrou had clearly smiled upon their daughter; Harley Eljarrn had left the city several years ago to search for mercenary work and find her way in the world.
The pay had been fair, and the work had been easy-- as it usually was, for creatures of their size and stature, especially when "threatened" by the smaller and more delicate races.

Her scales glittering in the firelight, Harley told the tale of her journeys throughout Valenth, her eventual settlement as a bouncer in a little bar somewhere in Gier--

And the chance encounter that marked the end of her old job, and the beginning of her position as the drummer for Glass Marionette.

Her twenty-four siblings-- all between the ages of four to sixteen-- leapt up and down with excitement and cut in at every chance they got, demanding to know what it was like to perform, if it was true that she broke the drum kits by accident while she was on tour, if she was now rich, and if she had ever seen Lyric's eyes.

Laughing, she answered their questions patiently, glad to be home after so long, exhausted and eager for a long night's rest in her old home with the soft mud between her toes.

And suddenly, a blue silisk parted the crowd, his eyes wide with astonishment, his voice panicked.

Harley began to reassure him that she was still the same old girl, and that there was no need for star treatment in her own village--
and then, among fearful and horrified faces, the newcomer explained in a bellowing voice that news had come from Liasse far to the south.

A silver silisk had appeared in the city of Mages, wielding magic, claiming to be the Father himself and seeking his children.

The temporary silence swiftly rose into the dull and pounding roar of hundreds of angry voices.

Book IV Chapter 2: From Me to You

Dear Hans,

How are things with you and your music business? I know it's been a while since the last time I wrote you, but work has been hectic.
I can't really give you too many details, unfortunately-- you know how things are in the Organization. Or, you have a vague idea. ~~Alright, I can't really give you too many details, because that's how things are in the Org~~

One of my coworkers had a... *work-related accident* which culminated in the destruction of my lab.

Yes, again, I know-- I seem to have the worst luck.
Then again, I'm still alive!

Write me back, let me know how you're doing.

- Gabe

Gabe,

So *that's* what you've been up to. Well, I guess that's a fair enough reason for forgetting to send me that little care package I asked for.
You wound me with your absentmindedness!

The music's going well, though the bar's been playing host to some refugees for the past few months. Chimaera business, I don't know if you've heard about it away over there. Apparently some big dust up in the desert and the city was taken over. Hilda's complaining about the fur smell, says she's allergic or something. You know what she's like when she doesn't get her own way, the diva.
She does have a point about one thing though - the walls are heaving, but we're not making any money. Refugees aint exactly in the giving mood, not that I blame them, but... you know. A man's gotta eat.

So, about that money! Where is it?

- Hans

Hans,

I haven't forgotten-- I just haven't had a chance to get anything shipped over yet.

Everyone's been hustling over here to get the place fixed back up again. They sent in officials from Chimre, it was that serious.
I've been getting quite a few funny looks from them, too-- I don't know what's going on, but I'm trying to just tell myself I'm being pointed at as the "guy who keeps getting his stuff wrecked".
I don't think I have the heart to handle anything more eventful than that right now.

Chimaera, huh? I heard about that... *whatever's* going on up there. Have you heard the details? Something about some sort of legend of theirs showing up en masse and tossing them out. Fascinating stuff-- if I wasn't so certain I'd end up on the wrong end of things, I'd kill to see it for myself.

You still pining after Hilda, huh? How many years has it been now? If she hasn't noticed you yet, she's not going to-- you should probably just consider her a work friend and start looking elsewhere. Sorry.

And I don't know if I have anything to spare for you this time-- restocking my lab has been financially excruciating. You'd think they'dve given me a steel-reinforced one by now.

- Gabe

Gabe,

I'm surprised they let you near a lab at *all*, frankly. All those dangerous chemicals and materials, it's only a matter of time until you blow up half the city. You've got me in your will, haven't you? I mean, I assume you've already written one; don't they *make* you when you work there anyway?

The Chimaeras were talking about something called Amols. Some ancient sand bugs that they had a truce with for as long as anyone can remember, but now it's been broken and they're taking back what they think is theirs, or something. It's a story they don't really want to tell at the moment. Which isn't so bad, really, since they give Courtesans a run for their money in the storytelling department, and they've got *plenty* of other stories to share.
One of their elders started telling stories to their children before bed, and soon the patrons and staff started to crowd into the corner to listen to, and now we've got people crawling the walls to get in and listen.

I just wish they'd *buy booze* while they were in.

Hilda is crazy about me, she just doesn't know it yet. We've got big plans, that girl and I, and we're going to make ourselves a fortune and go and live in the country together. She's agreed to it and everything, and why would she go and do that if she didn't have some special place for me in that big beautiful heart of hers? I'm telling you, it's a sure thing.
I may even invite you to the wedding, if you promise not to touch anything.

You might blow it up.

- Hans

Book IV Chapter 3: From Axl With Love

Axl, South Dreamsong

With a weary sigh, Gabriel strode out into the streets of Axl in a tattered old jacket he'd kept for just this purpose, standing on a street corner with his hand outstretched as he waited for a carriage to happen by.

He had better clothes than this, certainly-- but he couldn't wear them when he visited his brother.
The man was a jazz singer, for crying out loud; he aught to have had far more to spare than some half-rate Doc-in-training.
But somehow, every time Gabe and Hans spoke, it always came down to the same thing.

Money.

Money for booze, to be precise.

Well, Gabe didn't intend to continue to fuel his habi--
The sharp point of a knife against the small of his back cut short his train of thought.

"Oi, mate. Yer wallet and yer dreamshard. I know yer one of them flowerboys, so don't act smart. Just hand 'em over real nice-like, and we can both get on with it," came a gruff and raspy voice behind him.

Oh, the charms of Axl.

It was, by all rights, a beautiful seaside city. But mix in a lion's share of gangs, its very own criminal organization, and the seedy pirates that tended to flourish at the Auction House by the bay, and...

...well, there was a reason people tended to visit Jetersborough for leisure instead.

"Listen, all I have on me is cab fare--" Gabe began, cautious.

"No! No, *you* listen, pansy-ass! Gimme yer loot--all of it!-- or else... erp!"

The knife clattered to the ground; spinning on his heel, Gabe knelt to pick it up, wiping it on his coat and carefully tucking it away beneath it before looking up at the massive blue-on-white leupak which had somehow snuck up on the thief without a sound.
The ratty-looking man hung from the leupak's meaty claw-- wrapped tightly around his throat as the creature tilted its head.

Curious, Gabe's eyes flitted to a disturbed manhole cover nearby-- far too small for the creature to have sprung from, at first glance.
Of course.

Despite their typically large size, leupaks were masters of squeezing in and out of tight spots. With the SRO's Axl branch nearby, the reptilian monsters were on constant patrol-- usually out of sight-- on these streets, all too happy to pounce on any petty thugs that happened to cause trouble.

Worse, this one had decided to go after one of the Organization's own. *Foolish*, that.

"Or else what, soft-skin?" The beast drawled, its eyes narrowed.

"Or-or else? What're ya on about? I wasn't sayin' nothin!"

The leupak glanced over at Gabriel, its lips parted in a toothy grin. "Don't worry. I'll handle this one-- no one'll miss 'im. Go on about your way, Doc."

With a respectful nod of the head and a weary sigh, Gabriel climbed into his taxi as the leupak calmly carried the thief off into a nearby alley, his panicked cries rising into a horrified crescendo before, at last, falling silent.

Gabriel lay his head against the door of his compartment within the carriage, eyes closed, and pretended not to notice.

Book IV Chapter 4: Bumblebee

Whimsy Park
Gier, South Dreamsong

"Word on the street is that Soril's been deserted. The chimaera have mercenaries going in to check for stragglers and make sure of it," Elliot sighed, pressing her hand to her forehead and adjusting her glasses. "If everything goes well, perhaps in the next few months, they'll be able to return home."

The Twin Dancers beat down upon the little park, setting the leaves and flowers ablaze in glittering green and golden light.
The day was warm and inviting, drenched in the colors and scents of springtime; birds sang exuberantly as they danced upon budding branches, and magnificent insects buzzed and flitted over delicate new flowers busy flavoring the light but persistent breezes with their heady fragrance.

Elliot sat upon an old wooden bench, carefully flipping through the pages of a Dreamsong Gazette while her younger brother sprawled in the soft grass near her feet, belly-up.
A large bumblebee zoomed in to settle atop his nose, sending the gray leupak into a minor panic. "Aah! Aah, Elliot! Help!"

Elliot giggled softly. "Caz, you're alright. I don't think those sting."

Falling quiet, the frightened leupak laid his ears back and crossed his eyes to peer at it. "A-are you sure?"
Waving a paw gingerly, he shooed the tiny creature, which rose into the air with an indignant buzz before speeding away across the lawn.

"So, these things that chased the chimaera out in the first place...Amol. If they've lived in the desert with them all this time, why drive them out now? What led them to such a drastic measure all of a sudden?" Cazwell wondered aloud.

"I think the only one who might've known for sure is dead," Elliot mused. "By the sound of things, the former Grand Rajii had some sort of agreement with them. I assume that the terms were broken, whatever they were-- though, it makes me wonder about them.
The chimaera paint the creatures as evil things, something like... Like our bogeymen, dangerous and loathsome, the sort of thing you scare your kids with. They're obviously not monsters, though-- they're definitely intelligent, and if someone struck a deal with one... I don't know."

Cazwell frowned, carefully rolling onto his side to peer up at her, squinting in the light. "Well, how do you define a monster, really? Is it enough to do bad things without regard for other creatures, or is it a matter of intelligence and potential, or aesthetics? I mean... some people might argue that I'm a monster," he said, spreading his arms pointedly. "I might even feel inclined to agree, in fact."

Elliot shook her head, setting her newspaper down with a smile.

"Caz... you're too sweet to be a monster."

Book IV Chapter 5: Bad Luck Brothers

Gier, South Dreamsong

Gabriel dropped his fare into the waiting hand of the carriage driver before climbing out onto the sidewalk.
Lips drawn tight, he strode at a brisk pace down the busy street, glancing over his shoulder at the sound of passing footsteps-- just to be safe.

Around the corner, the sound of lively jazz music swelled from within a little bar with a single lit sign that flickered dimmer and brighter as a gentle breeze blew.
With a soft sigh, Gabe paused for a moment to adjust his cravat and lean onto his walking stick as he gathered his wits about him.

Something small skittered out from an alley a few paces away, and he practically flung himself into midair.

"GYAAAAAAH!"

A moment's panicked observation revealed a lone gierkett which ignored him as it hunted about for a scrap to eat.

With one more glance around the street for good measure, he pulled open the Emery Lounge's front door and slipped in. The heady scent of fragrant cigars and herbal cigarettes tickled his nose, and the jazz band's music thundered mercilessly through the floorboards and against his eardrums.

An instrumental, he noticed-- were they even here? A sudden shout eased his worries, but new ones quickly arose.

"Hey! Hey, Gabe! I see you over there! C'mere!"

A hand reached out from the seemingly endless cluster of populated tables and waved him over. Quietly, Gabe obliged, squeezing and dodging his way through the crush of patrons and lurking chimaera-- to finally be plucked and dragged into a seat by his leering brother.
"About time. What took you? Siddown. Drink! ... and gimme yer bag," Hans added with a grin, plonking a heavy mug of beer down in front of the scientist with one hand, holding the other out expectantly.

"What? No, I'll keep that, actually. And, um... I had a bit of an incident on the way over. Oh... hello, Hilda."

Finally getting a hold of his nerves, Gabe realized Hans wasn't alone at the table; his singing partner (and long-time subject of unrequited adoration) peered at him for a moment before offering a reserved smile. "Hello, Gabriel."

"An incident? Another one?" Hans rose an eyebrow. "It's a fluke you're still alive and kicking, you know that? Maybe you aught to retire early. You're set for life already, aren't you, with all that... Rose nonsense." Hans shook his head. "Anyway, you got something for me?"

"Retire? Hans, I *just* got my official license a little while ago. It's not like you sign up and they drown you in money just for showing up. Besides, what's the deal with *you?* You're the big singer, I should be harassing you for handouts, don't you think?"

"It's not like that," Hilda began with a little sigh. "We work ourselves sick out here, and for nothing much. We got food and a place to stay, but what is that? You're better off than him," she said, eyeing Hans accusingly.

"Woah, woah! You didn't have to say it like that," Hans sulked. "Anyway, yeah. It's pretty rough. We sing, we dance, sure, but we make a pittance on it. So, really. *Cough up, already*."

Gabriel pressed a hand to his forehead; he could smell the booze on Hans's breath, as always.

His older brother may have had a point-- he had been in the music business for several years now, and while he was quite popular with the people of Gier, he was far from world-renowned or even known, and Hans clearly yearned for stardom.

On the other hand, Gabe was little-enthused to fund his brother's apparent drinking habit. He was in no mood for an argument in the middle of the Lounge tonight, however; quietly, he pulled his wallet and removed several notes, sliding them across the table.

They were snatched up almost as soon as they had touched the polished wood.

"See, see? I knew you'd understand, Gabe. Thanks for helping your family out. S'good having someone you can count on, isn't it?"

"It sure is, Hans," Gabe replied dryly.

Book IV Chapter 6: Little Bird

Gier, South Dreamsong

Elliot carefully brushed off her jacket as she made her way up the little steps to Selarion's door, reflexively glancing over a shoulder before knocking softly, listening to the approach of footsteps and the gentle click of the knob on the other side before the door swung open and the housekeeper welcomed her in.

"Ah, Miss Elliot. Is the master expecting you? I believe he already has--"

"Elliot! Come in, come in - this is a pleasant surprise. How lovely to see you. Oh, keep your coat, we're out in the gardens today."

Selarion interrupted cheerfully, coming down the grand staircase with a tower of books delicately balanced against his chest. Without any further explanation, he offered a polite smile before heading off through the kitchens to the veranda outside, assuming Elliot would follow.

"Oh, *Selarion*-- ah, of course!" Following along beside him, she considered the large stack of books in his arms with curiosity. "Do you need any help with those?"

"Ah, if you could just grab the top two... thank you."

The pair continued along way to the bottom of the garden, where two figures sat upon the grass, chattering away to each other.
Preoccupied, Elliot took no notice at first, squinting at the books she had taken to carry, both brightly-illustrated; they hardly seemed proper reading material for someone of Selarion's education.

"Oh, Selarion-- have you come across a child?" she asked, finally lifting her head to consider the two nearby.

"In a manner of speaking," he replied. "Don't be alarmed, and try not to move too quickly. He's... *shy*."

Selarion cleared his throat as they approached, and the pair turned their heads to meet him.
While from a distance they seemed to be in costume, a second glance revealed a pair of brilliantly-colored wings on each of them-- and one of the two was entirely covered in feathers. Elliot's eyes grew wide in shock.

"Kelan, Wren. We have a visitor," Selarion began. "Miss Elliot, this is Kelan, a dear friend of mine, and Wren, a harpy that recently came into my possession."

Wren blinked up at Elliot with big, nervous eyes, clutching a book to his rapidly-beating chest. He said nothing, and letting his gaze dart nervously to Kelan and chirping softly instead.

"I... oh. H-hello," Elliot breathed.

Kelan gently placed a hand over one of Wren's, and giving it a light squeeze and smiling a bit. "It's you-- hello. I'm glad to have a chance to meet you when I'm not... in such a state," he said apologetically.
The Chapter didn't seem nearly so intimidating when he wasn't wrapped in flames, though he had an intense gaze that alarmed Elliot somewhat.

"I didn't know you and Selarion knew each other..." she said, glancing between the three of them in quiet wonder. "And Wren, how amazing. How *lovely*."

"You'll have to forgive Wren, he's very shy around new people. We've been trying to find out more about him, but we don't believe he speaks. Rather, he's capable of mimicry, and understands us to some degree, but doesn't seem able to formulate the words himself. "

Wren peeped and chirped faintly to himself, though Selarion's mention of his name seemed to catch his attention briefly. After a moment, he repeated it,in a shockingly accurate immitation of Selarion's voice.

"...Wren."

Checking for an empty spot, Elliot settled upon her knees. "So the two of you are teaching him! Hello, Wren."
Gently handing the new books to Kelan, Selarion joined them in the grass, reaching out for the book Wren clutched tightly against his breast. Preoccupied with watching Elliot, Wren failed to notice, instead staring at her and lifting his crest nervously until Selarion carefully pried the book free, setting it down between them.

"Ideally, we'd like to use literature on the harpies themselves to find out more about him, but it's in shockingly poor supply. Even the detersborough library has little to go on, though I've put in a request for a number of volumes that may prove useful. He reacts most strongly to the pictures, though... Kelan will just have to learn to draw."

At that, the Flamekeeper perked up slightly with a little grin. "Oh, that's no good. The poor thing'll end up more confused than ever!"

Elliot was careful to keep her voice soft and even, so as to not frighten Wren while she spoke. "I wonder if they wouldn't have any information in Liasse. They seem like the sorts to have picked up something about rarities such as this-- mm, though it feels so impolite referring to him as a thing. Wren... Such a fitting name for a little bird.
"At any rate, I could certainly check into my resources for you, if you liked."

Wren was soon absorbed in the picture book with Selarion, listening to him carefully and parroting what he said as he read aloud. As soon as Elliot opened her mouth again, however, his focus shifted to her once more, his crest bobbing up and down with a nervous look on his face.

Selarion was curious. "...I wonder if it's the sound of your voice, Miss Elliot-- oh, I beg your pardon, not like that. A woman's voice, I mean. The house staff have been instructed not to talk to him yet, for fear of confusing his tutoring... but *something's* certainly getting his attention."

"Hmm. Well, he is a young male-- it's certainly a possibility," she giggled faintly. "All joking aside, perhaps there's some sort of connection in this. Do you know where they originate? If we could schedule an expedition, perhaps we could fill in the blanks."

Selarion winced as Wren pointed to an illustration of a soaring red and gold dragon, and quietly sounds out the word 'Flarion' for him. Dutifully, Wren repeated it, still with Selarion's voice, as Kelan watched silently.

"Not as such, though I've tried to get some more information from the auction house. I know the ship that brought him in, but it hasn't touched port for several months now."

"Mmm, that's a pity. There must be a lead in this somewhere. I could get the Somnambulists on it-- it'd be the very least I could do. *Someone* must have encountered these harpies at some point."

"Oh no, don't trouble yourself," Selarion said, shaking his head lightly. "...I confess, I've rather enjoyed this little research project. I think Wren enjoys the interactions too. He's been teaching Kelan how to look after his wings."

Looking up, Kelan grinned again, spreading his wings just far enough to wiggle the fingers of them meaningfully.

Elliot nodded. "Well, in that case-- do keep me updated. He certainly seems to be getting along well here... and it's a bit endearing to watch, at

that," she added with a smile.
Selarion smiled in turn, watching as Wren pointed at a molted feather that floated down onto the page, looking accusingly at Kelan, who lifted it between his fingertips to lightly tickle Wren's nose.

"...And what of you, Miss Elliot? How have you been?" he asked gently. "I'm... so sorry about your brother, truly."

"Gier is... slowly calming down again after the chaos a few months ago, I think. Cazwell, on the other hand... he worries me a bit," she sighed, shaking her head. "He never really came to terms with his transformation, and he's not been in a right mind since before he left for Chimre originally. I've been offering all of the help and support I can, but..."

At once, Kelan froze in place, his ears pricking upright.

"But it's difficult to know where to begin," Selarion finished for her. "It must be hard for both of you, though I don't doubt you're giving him all the love and support you can. Are there others like him that you might be able to speak to? I expect it's not unheard of."

"I'm not certain. Perhaps in Chimre, but I don't know if he'd be comfortable with going back to find out, if so. I just wish there was a way I could help him understand that I still love him, no matter what he happens to be."

"I suppose it may simply take time. It's a big change for anyone to go through, and to do so unwillingly..."

Kelan frowned, but said nothing, his eyes now locked upon Elliot. Oblivious, she nodded slowly.
"However long it takes.. I'll be there for him. I'm sure he knows that."

"If there's anything I can do..." he said with a smile, leaving the rest unsaid. She'd always known he was a shoulder to lean on.

"Of course. Thank you, Selarion."

Nodding, Selarion got to his feet. "...Now. I do believe it's time for lunch. Wren, lunch?"
"...Lunch." The harpy smiled.

Book IV Chapter 7: Looking For Someone?

Gier, South Dreamsong

Cazwell silently made his way down a poorly-lit road, the streetlamps old and dim and poorly-kept.
Dark shadows flitted over the broken pavement and in and out of crevices and alleyways, chirping shrilly to one another as they went.

Clenching his jaw shut, the leupak laid his ears back flat against his head and continued onward, his eyes moving fom sign to weather-worn sign; it was around here somewhere.

A group of chimaera and humans stood near an abandoned building; their conversation paused, and all five lifted their heads to stare at him as he approached.

"Pardon, but do you... ah, do you know where the Luxi Alchemist is staying nowadays? I need--"

One of the chimaera pointed farther down the street without a word.

"Excellent. Th-thank you," Caz stammered before hurriedly continuing on, glancing over his shoulder.

This part of Gier wasn't one people often traveled lightly-- and even less, alone-- but Cazwell figured he could keep would-be attackers at bay by sheer virtue of what he currently was.
Of course, uttering a word would immediately ruin that tactic, so he had made it a point to stay silent for as long as he could during his trip.
Even now, he felt the loiterers' eyes upon his scaly back, and knew they had pegged him as a weakling outsider-- easy pickings, if they'd decided he had anything they found desirable.

But no footsteps came to follow him, and so he eventually relaxed again, at least as much as he could allow himself in the situation.

Rounding a corner, he took note of a darkened shop with the door open just a crack, and a Luxi flag draped over one window.
This was the place.

Drawing a shaking breath, Caz rapped lightly on the doorframe. "H-hell--"

"Door's open. Come inside," came a voice like a hissing viper.

The smell of strong incense, pungent spices and bitter chemicals stung Cazwell's nostrils as he slipped through the door.
A dozen candles sat before a gilded mirror in the back of the great and dusty room was the only light, casting a sickly yellow glow over countless exotic bottles of colored glass propped up against walls, atop crates and gathered in rusted buckets.

The Alchemist sat atop the largest crate, cautiously nursing a spiralling horn-pipe as she studied Cazwell with yellow cats' eyes, her scales a deep indigo with tiny flecks of gold carved into them like stars, wearing little save for a length of filmy red fabric lain over her waist.

Clicking her tongue in her throat, she pulled her pipe away from her lips.

"No facet, no presence, and *no pride.* Mmm. Don't say a word; I already know why you're here, and it will cost you dearly, *my little chiqadi.*"

Book IV Chapter 8: A Newspaper And A Pint

The Emery Lounge
Gier, South Dreamsong

"Hey, check this out," Hans announced, holding up his copy of the Dreamsong Gazette so Hilda could read over his shoulder. "It took them four million krus to repair the damage done in that crazy attack that happened a few months ago. Four million! Can you even imagine that kinda money?"

Frowning slightly, Hilda skimmed over the article. "Something's not right about all this. First the spider-things, then the attacks in Chimre, weird dragon sightings over the city, the chimaera showing up here, the takeover in Schalle... and now a full-scale undead attack? It's an awful lot of excitement all at once, don't you think?"

"Yeah, it kinda is. But do you really think it's all related? Stuff happens-- probably all the time, outside of Gier. It's nothing to worry too much about, as long as we've got the band, the bar, and each other, right?"

"That's just it," Hilda insisted, neatly avoiding his question. "It's not just other places, not anymore. The spid-- Enx-whatever-they-weres, those came *here*. The dragons flew over *here*. The zombies attacked us, *here!"*

She lowered her voice a bit, glancing over at Gabriel as he paid for a drink at the bar.
"You don't think it's the Rose up to something, do you? They've always been so shady, like... like a criminal organization or something."

"Don't be silly, babe," Hans laughed. "They're just pharmacists or something, really. I don't think my little brother would mess around with a crime syndicate. Besides, if it was them.. I dunno. It's stuff all over the world-- they don't have that kinda influence, not with the Firestarters and the Court hanging around."

"I don't know," Hilda sighed. "After all, the Firestarters aren't doing too well right now, by the sound of it. A friend of a friend is a member, and she says most of their dragons have defected. Didn't the stories say they were the Flamekeeper's *children*? If that's possible, what does it mean for them-- and do they have the manpower to stand up to anything right now?"

"Well, they took care of the zombies," Hans pointed out.

"Mm, that is something, yes. Still, it's troubling. Schalle was their base of operations, and that's property of this new faction now, whatever they were called.
"If they're to survive, they have to regroup-- and it's not as though the Court will take action to help them. I could be wrong, but I doubt it... I know about as much about them as I do the Rose, and they probably won't do anything for or against either side unless there's good reason to. Which says something, if these new guys are being allowed to continue to gain power..."

Hans shook his head. "You're crazy smart. I can hardly keep up with this stuff, and here you are digging up top secret information. What else do you know?"

Hilda grinned. "It's not really top-secret, just casual knowledge-- everybody's talking about this sort of thing if you listen in on people. Anyway, weirdest thing of all? There's word of some guy who's shown up in Liasse claiming to be the father of the Silisks."

Her companion was unimpressed. "...That's kinda typical, really. Crazies are everywhere--"

"...and they believe him."

Hans fell silent, and the pair exchanged glances.

"What? No!"

"Really."

"...*Really?!*"

Gabriel could just make out Hans and Hilda's voices over the dull mumble of conversation in the bar, but their words were lost in the jumble. He sighed, and took in a mouthful of his drink; it left a bitter film over his tongue, but did little to ease his worries.

That leupak's horrible, two-jawed visage was seared into his memory; its eyes bored into him as it leered, mouths opening and closing wordlessly.

Eva was alive, which was probably horrendously unfortunate for her; wherever she was now, she'd likely never see the light of day again, and Chapters only knew what Anom was doing with-- or to-- her, now protected by her family's belief that she was gone.

There was no sense in looking for a dead person, after all.

He had gone to his superior to demand information as to Eva's ultimate fate-- and failed, of course, though the woman had sympathized with him.

"Listen, Anom is rough, and he's really not suited to handle anything that isn't an inanimate object," she admitted. "But he won't have Eva for long. She's varworgn now, and that means she'll likely end up under Na'than's care after the Houselord's learned what he can about the Scepter of Voghn."

"The Scepter of Voghn? Like, the old wolf-god? ...and *who is Na'than?*" Gabe asked, utterly lost.

"If you don't know, we're doing our job," she laughed. "You'll find out in time. For now, worry about your own assignments, huh? Something big is coming up, and we're going to need all the information we can find. You'll probably get your first field duty... and it looks like Aensdoun for you."

Gabe closed his eyes and shuddered into his mug, dragging his thoughts back into the present moment.

Aensdoun! How could they send someone like *him* there?

Eva may be a secret prisoner in Chimre now, but Gabe was certain he was *really going to die.*

Book IV Chapter 9: Bearing Witness

Lassenbhurg, Liasse

"I come here to do a concert that ends up canceled, I leave to visit my family... and then I come back again with my family to put some charlatan in his place. What is it about this city?" Harley wondered, her arms folded across her chest as she made her way through the cobbled streets with a crowd of other silisk at least fifty strong.

At least, her particular party was; hundreds, if not thousands of silisk flooded into the mages' city in a great swarm, catching the occasional curious bystander or wandering magician in the slow advance forward.
To the reptilian people, this was no small deal, and their presence in Lassenbhurg today due to the influence of a single man made that fact more than apparent.

The legends passed down through generations taught of Bapa Dilndrou, the wise old alligator who had given a piece of himself to create their people thousands of years ago, and taught them to respect and revere the core elements of earth, water, fire and air-- as well as all things that came from them.
In those days, the silisk lived and worked by his side, and every child in every village was presented to Bapa to celebrate the gift of new life in ceremony and song.

Even when the old god of the swamps disappeared, his name and his teachings were remembered and paid homage to by all silisk-- most of all, the importance of unity, strength, and devotion to the natural world.

And so, someone claiming to be Bapa himself was enough of an insult-- but to have the backing of the Archmages of Lassenbhurg was another thing entirely!

Lost in her thoughts, Harley ran into the backs of the people before her as they suddenly came to a stop.
The silisk had come to the Academy of Arcana's grand staircase, which had been blocked off by a magical barrier.
At the top of the stairs stood several Archmagi, each in the official colors denoting their speciality-- the navy blues of the Arcanus, the silvery Vitalist, the dull gold of the Scholar, and at the forefront, the vivid violets and reds of the Elementalist.
Behind these four stood eight mages clad in red and black-- the colors of the elite Lassen Mage-Guard.

Seeing targets for their frustration, the crowd's voices erupted in a dull and angry roar, demanding an explanation, demanding the charlatan be brought forward and made to answer for their claims, demanding to know why the magi of Liasse-- such noble people!-- were becoming involved in such a ploy.

"If you could all calm down for a few moments," came the voice of the master scholar, all but consumed by the noise from the crowd below. "We understand your anxiety, and would like to conduct this meeting in an orderly fashion."

Several tribes began to roar; Harley gritted her teeth, reaching to press her palms against the sides of her head to muffle the sound.
No good-- it simply made the Archmagi that much more difficult to hear.

"Please," he said, frowning. "The sooner you quiet down, the sooner you will be free to split us open upon the stair."

The Arcanus laughed heartily, while the Vitalist exchanged nervous glances with the Guard. The Elementalist did not react, his craggy gray face impassive.

He caught Harley's eye almost at once; even from such a distance, he stood out from his peers. Enormously tall-- he dwarfed every other mage near him by a head, at least-- he seemed an alien creature, and yet worryingly familiar all at once.

He did not wear the chapeau that was standard to the Lassen mages' uniform; instead, he wore only the beaded circlet around his forehead, his silvery hair tied into a long braid that stood proudly atop his head before dropping back and disappearing behind his shoulders.

His eyes were a pale shade of watery blue-- a peculiar detail to catch from her position, and made all the stranger by the illusion that he was staring straight at her.

Harley suddenly felt naked. She shifted in place uneasily, glancing to her side to see if anyone else was quite so unsettled.

Next, the Arcanus's voice rang out over the crowd, seeming to amplify itself just enough to be heard clearly over all else. "It was with extreme suspicion and caution that we recently allowed a perfect stranger into our midst, and with the utmost care and rigor that we tested his claims and intentions. The discoveries we made were... startling, at a word, and we felt we owed it to the people of Valenth to share what we have found-- no, what has been presented to us."

Her words merely fueled the silisks' impatience; several began throwing themselves bodily at the magical barrier, all too eager to break through and share their opinion of the proceedings at close range.

The Arcanus shook her head and grinned, turning to murmur something to the other three magi. Now the Vitalist's face went white, and he threw his hands into the air dramatically, which only set the female Archmage to laughing again.

"Right, then! Stop wasting our time-- *where's the man who made this claim?!"* shouted a voice from the crowd, and hundreds more rose to offer their agreement.

Quietly, the Elementalist came forward, descending the Academy stairs so that he could press his hand against the barrier, gazing out at the sea of silisk faces staring back in anger.

"Your predecessors drifted away from me a long time ago," he murmured, and as a vision older than history flooded into their minds' eye, one by one the crowd grew silent and still.

"I... am "that man", he said.

Book IV Chapter 10: A Panacea, An Omen

Location Unknown

The sky flowed and undulated overhead like a turbulent ocean, frothing clouds streaked across its surface.

Cazwell gripped his stomach and sat up, soft grass crunching lightly beneath him.
Green hills stretched outwards as far as he could see, utterly empty save for a single, massive tree on the horizon.

Hello?

His voice echoed when he spoke, with a harsh edge that chilled him somewhat.
But it sounded human, and he felt clean, though his insides churned unsettlingly.

Hello? I... don't think I should be here right now. Is anyone--

A low roar suddenly battered Cazwell's ears, and the earth trembled; with a frightened gasp, he crawled backwards, gazing up.

Before him, an enormous creature now stood, towering over him like the tallest buildings in Gier.
Its scales glittered in the light like pearl; its broad, feathery wings beat slowly, a billion shining stars and nebulae like rainbows dancing over them.
The beast's three eyes burned like tiny lights as they examined him carefully.

It resembled a leupak of some sort, almost-- but, leupaks didn't have wings, either.
...did they?
Cazwell wasn't certain whether to be terrified or amazed.

What-- who are...?

Stay calm, replied a voice much gentler than Cazwell expected; he knew it was the beast's, although it did not open its mouth.
A great claw carefully passed over the boy's head, and his pain dulled somewhat.

You were poisoned, it explained. *You will be fine now, but you mustn't move for a while.*

Am I human again now? Cazwell asked.

The creature's eyes narrowed slightly; dropping onto all fours, it snaked its head down to peer more closely at Cazwell. Sticky pink liquid oozed from its maw, dripping down into the grass at its feet, transforming it into sharp crystals as he watched with growing fear.

You were poisoned, it repeated, simply.

But I want to turn back. You know something. Tell me-- help me!

A sharp pain jerked Cazwell awake.
In agony, he rolled over and retched over the bedside, inky black ichor spattering the floor.
With a groan, he closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, pressing a trembling paw to his forehead.

"That... lying *bitch*," he gasped, and wondered if he was going to die.

Book IV Chapter 11: Forest Jewels

Many of the Silisk of Faerwethr make their living within the Miracrystal Mines.
Because the energy of the crystal takes far longer to endanger them than other humanoid races, the raw gemstones can easily fetch a high price.

Oddly, on their way to and from the mines, the miners often encounter miracrystal boas near and around the mine entrances.

Despite being purely arboreal, these snakes seem to make their way into the mines, sometimes wandering into the deeper levels where they pester and watch the workers, occasionally stealing and devouring tiny bits of crystal.

Over time, the silisk of Faerwethr have come to see the iridescent snakes as guardians sent by Dilndrou-- they are carried upon one's shoulders through the mines until work is done, and then placed back in the trees where they belong before the miners head home again.

When handled by the silisks, the snakes are always docile, happy to curl around an arm, shoulder or neck and enjoy the company for a while.

To date, no one has found any logical explanation for this behavior.

Book IV Chapter 12: The Grand Circle

The Jetersborough Grand Circle
Jetersborough, South Dreamsong

The crowd at the Jetersborough Circle was visibly excited, men watching and murmuring to one another about their picks, jauntily-dressed ladies carefully holding their hats atop their heads as a sharp gust of wind threatened to pluck them away.

The sun shone brightly upon the track, and the jockeys on the track couldn'tve been more grateful for it-- rain had been forecast for the day, and running goats through mud was never anything but treacherous.

They paraded their bovi along the track, the sturdy animals marching along with horned heads lifted high for all to see; the jockeys may have been in control, and their owners may have paid for their inclusion, but the goats knew that the spotlight was truly *theirs*.

Near the front of the stands, a rotund man dressed from head to toe in white ruffles and lace watched the procession carefully, his crimson hair tied back with a single ribbon, one arm wrapped around the waist of his blonde companion, clad in a sharp black suit.
He pointed onto the track with his free hand as a white bovi strode by on its way to the front of the track, its rider gently stroking the beast's head.
Chattering amongst themselves at length, the couple seemed unaware that they had drawn the attention of quite a few spectators nearby, gossiping shamelessly about them between talk of odds and the finest hats at the Circle.

With the goats finally in place, the track at last fell silent.

A single, thunderous crack sounded, and the bovi shot out of their stalls.

The crowd cheered, and the race was on.

Book IV Chapter 13: The Sleepwalkers

Doctor Dorian Adelaide carefully tucked folders full of loose papers and battered journals into his briefcase, his fedora balanced precariously atop his head as he worked. From his position in his office, he could see his wife standing about in the living room nearby, wringing her hands and seeming for all the world like a ruffled and upset bird.

"Lace, darling, don't fret so," he pleaded with her. "It's just routine fieldwork; I'll be back again and in your hair before you know it-- it's not as though I'm shipping off to Aensdoun."

But the woman was having none of it. "No one goes to that dreadful place anyway, Dorian. Middle Dreamsong is bad enough. You don't know what filthy beasts are lurking in all of that mud and muck. Why, what if a basilisk eats you?"

"What if, indeed!" he laughed, brushing a bit of dust from his vest. Satisfied with his haul, he sealed his briefcase up tight and slid a hand into his pocket, withdrawing a circular tin and placing a pinch of the contents-- dry and vivid orange-- into his mouth. "You worry too much; have you tended to your garden today? Perhaps that'll soothe you somewhat."

Lacey Adelaide and her husband both served the Somnambulist Project of Gier; she a herbalist, he a field biologist. The couple exchanged notes often, a tradition that had begun in the many laboratories of their college well before they had decided to join the world-renowned scientific organization together. They were fond of their work and proud of their accomplishments, and happy together to boot.

So when Dorian recieved a formal request from his superiors to gather an expedition and journey into the depths of Middle Dreamsong together, his wife was less than excited at the prospect.
Make no mistake, she was just as happy to work alone and just as skilled-- but she was certain the trip would be dangerous, and insisted he politely decline and move on to other things. Woman's intuition, she called it.

But he was unimpressed.

"Lacey, you know the Project depends upon all of our work. They wouldnt've asked me to do this if it wasn't important; they need me! And they need you, as well," he added, stepping into the front room to fondly tweak her nose.
Despite herself, Lacey responded with a soft giggle, and Dorian matched it with a smile.

"I know, Dorian," she sighed at last. "I won't keep you from your work any more than you'd keep me from mine."

"Don't think of it like that, dearheart. It's the Project's work. And I won't be long."

It was a dreary and mucky day; Dorian held his briefcase over his head to shield it as he headed briskly down the road to the Headquarters building, where his fellows would be awaiting his arrival. Passing by several carriages on his way, he gave the grumpy land-drakes a sympathetic nod as he went; the scaly, saurian beasts did not enjoy the wet weather, and he felt inclined to agree with them.
The Somnambulists' building was a mercifully short trip away, however, and so the doctor made it to the front door less than sopping wet. Plodding through the entryway, the warm yellow light of the lobby touched his face, seeming to instantly draw away his rain-induced gloom just in time for his colleagues to greet him.

Strewn about the various couches and chairs in the cozy room, they waved and nodded and smiled at him in unison; Kurt Erwin, all muscle and rumpled dark hair, squeezed humorously into a tiny chair, Gigi Urbain, the Chimre-born mirologist clenching a cigarette holder between her teeth as she tried in vain to look less rain-soaked than she actually was; and Todd--just Todd-- a stout young silisk that blended in with the steely blue couch he sat upon all too well.

"And how long did it take you to convince poor Lacey that you were not off to your death?" Gigi purred with a smirk, giving a surprised little squeak as Kurt reached over to nudge her in the rib with one of his massive elbows. "Oi!"

Dorian grinned, well-used to their antics. "Oh, come on. It didn't take too long... well, I never actually *convinced* her, either," he admitted. "But she'll be alright. And so will we."

"She's a fine woman," Kurt growled-- not out of any sort of distress, but simply because his deep voice permitted little else. "You deserve someone fussing after you, I think. But now, we have much bigger things to consider." He gestured to the world map spread atop a nearby table. "Our most direct route is to take the train as close to Faerwethr as it'll go, and then hoof it from there. It won't take us too far up, but it'll save us a night of camping out in the mud."

Dorian took note of Todd's grin, looking for all the world like a smug blue toad. "Go ahead, Todd. Say it and get it out of the way."
But the silisk only began to laugh.

"I'll say it for him," Gigi volunteered, sucking in a deep breath of air and deepening her voice. "Home sweet home, ahur!"

"I don't sound *anything* like that!" Todd protested.

The train plowed diligently through the thick forests of Dreamsong, drumming out a steady rhythm on its tracks as it sped along. Gigi perched in Kurt's lap as she sipped at her tea, and Todd gazed carefully through the window, following each passing tree with his three golden eyes.

"Aensdoun and Dreamsong used to be a single landmass, which is why there are so many similar idols and ruins in on both continents," Todd explained, twirling his thumbs around one another. "The *Aeneski* were always a supersitious race, and so when they found the idols, they simply took note of their positions and left them well alone. Treasure hunters and thrillseekers occasionally travel into Middle Dreamsong in the hopes of finding valuable artifacts near them, but as far as anyone ever knows, no one's ever messed with the Dragon Idols and come back with proof of it."

Kurt frowned silently.

"Eerie," Dorian breathed. "So... naturally, they want us to find some and "mess with them", as you say. I don't know if I can believe they're anything but remnants of some forgotten race, though, unless some of them have turned gargoyle."

Gargoyles were elemental curiosities common in the wilder parts of the continent; lifeless stone suddenly inspired to move and breathe due to some mysterious magic that left even the Lassen magi scratching their heads.
One of the enormous dragon idols changed in such a way would be a definite-- and possibly fatal-- shock for any would-be explorers.

"Well, this should be an easy job," Gigi yawned. "We go out there, we find these statues, they fail to moosh us into paste underfoot and we go home." She raised her empty teacup triumphantly into the air before retrieving the pot, noting with slight despair that it was now empty.

"Theoretically. Middle Dreamsong isn't quite the Faerielands, but it's still wild forest and marsh," Todd corrected, his eyes still glued on the ever-darkening scenery outside. "We'll need to be extremely careful, and it may take us days or even weeks to find an idol at all. Don't forget-- my job in this expedition is to make sure we all go home alive."

The silisk fell quiet suddenly, turning to note Gigi's eyes glued intensely on him.

"What?"

"It's so cute when you pretend to be serious."

Kurt groaned.

The group double-checked their bags as the train rolled away from the miserable little platform in the middle of nowhere. Despite the suns' best efforts, only thin beams of light trickled through the canopy above, leaving precious little to see by.
Slinging their various bags over one shoulder, Kurt looked questioningly down at Todd.
"Still feeling so certain of yourself?"

"That's a perfectly valid question, given the surroundings. That said-- *you're* here for a reason, too," Todd responded cooly, winning a respectful smile from the burly man. "The real question now is which way to head. The farther north we go, the more we risk run-ins with the smallfae. East, we'd be working our way towards Chimre... and while I'm sure Gigi would love a chance to visit her mum, I'm not so certain we'd find anything but a miserable, mutant-administered death that way." Gigi glared at him; he ignored her, continuing to eyeball the map. "West may be the best choice-- there's nothing blocking our way but ocean, and if we made it that far, it might be easier to dig things up in the sand."

"Well, Todd," Dorian announced, spinning in place to admire the gargantuan trees surrounding them at all sides. "You're our man-- and if I'm completely honest, I'm not terribly keen on standing here for much longer. By all means, do lead the way."

Gathering their wits about them, the group ventured out into the sticky woodland, keeping their eyes peeled along the way for telltale signs of their stone idols. Walking through the soft mud was tiresome; the stuff sucked at their feet with every step, thick and viscous as tar. Birds came and went in great flocks overhead, clucking and chirping and trilling in a symphony of avian voices.

"Pity none of them will come down and snap up these bugs," Gigi complained, and the other two humans agreed solemnly.
The insects were large and relentless, harassing them every step of the way-- protected by his thick scales, all Todd could offer was sympathy.

They pressed on despite their grievances, Kurt eventually carrying Gigi on his free shoulder as they plodded through the shallow wetlands. Suddenly, the Chimri woman gave an excited squeak, reaching down to shake Kurt's shoulder. "Wait, wait! I think I see one-- over there!"

Like a bull, Kurt broke into a run at once, crashing through the brush. It was all Dorian and Todd could do to exhaustedly trot after him, mildly envious of his stamina. Pushing through the upset bushes, they discovered Kurt and Gigi kneeling over the severed head of a stone dragon, sunken into the mud just a few inches deep.

"This damage is somewhat recent," Gigi breathed, pointing from the head to a nearby tree, its trunk partially scarred. "Look at that-- this piece must have been knocked away from an idol nearby by something, and almost clean through that tree."

Dorian's face fell. "Knocked by *what*, exactly? This head alone is bigger than anything any person would be able to lift or manipulate."

"I'd almost say a basilisk could've done this," Todd mused. "Except even the largest ones don't have that sort of strength. Kurt?"

"It's getting dark," the big man announced. "We should make camp... but not right here. We can find the rest of the idol in the morning."
Gigi nodded, her eyes wide. "I don't want to sleep right here, not when we might wake up under another piece of it."

Reaching up, she began to remove the equipment from Kurt's shoulder, scouting out a reasonably dry patch of ground nearby and rolling out the bags. As she worked, her eyes flitted through the trees to the stone head sitting there.

Nothing should've been capable of throwing that with such force.

Gigi screamed, leaping into the air as something brushed across her shoulder.
Whipping around, she found Dorian eyeing her sheepishly.

"I'm sorry... you seemed a little tense."

"..."seemed" is being too nice," she grumbled.

Todd built a campfire as Kurt sat atop his sleeping bag, staring expressionlessly into the deep shadows of the forest.
Seemingly lost in his own thoughts, Todd almost asked him what was on his mind when he caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye.

"What was--"

"Shhhhh," Kurt said.

Todd obediently clamped his mouth shut, squinting to see in the low light; he could just make out a large shape looking back at him.

Reaching for a small stone, Kurt palmed it then rolled it gently forward into the trees, causing the shadowy thing to snort and shuffle backwards.

"Bear."

"...bear?" The silisk started. "Is it a bear, or is it a *prrb*?"

Kurt smirked faintly. "Would you like me to go and ask? No, it's likely a proper bear-- there's not enough modern civilization out here to suit a prrb. Not enough easy food."

The big man seemed unconcerned, so Todd swallowed and returned to his work, his expression wary.

The party awoke to the smell of sizzling meat; Dorian cracked open an eye drowsily, spotting Todd perched over the campfire with a large wooden spear in hand.
Surprised, he slowly sat up, blinking.

"Where'd you... what's...?"

The silisk grinned smugly, holding it up to reveal a large bird threaded through the sharp end. "Crane. There were a few nearby, so I thought I'd grab one. Up for breakfast?" he asked, reaching to tear off a leg and offer it.

Dorian swallowed; he was unaccustomed to such preparation. "I... *uh."*

With a shrug, Todd bit into it himself, returning the rest to the fire to roast. "Suit yourself, then. Listen, I scouted out the rest of the idol after I woke up. It's not far, but there's something you're gonna want to see."

"Like what?" murmured Gigi, still in her sleeping bag with her back turned towards them. "You two could've quieted down a bit. Mmf, too late now."

"Oh, you'll *really* wanna see, Geeg. Why don't you come and eat first, though? And wake Kurt up, too-- we should start early, so we have plenty of time before sundown to check things out."

Gigi rolled over to exchange curious glances with Dorian before climbing to her feet.
The suns were still reasonably low in the sky; likely sometime mid-morning, by anyone's guess. Cranes strutted through the shallow pools nearby, though a few were keeping their distance from the camp, as though offended by Todd's hunting, or perhaps wary that he might want seconds.

Once roused, Kurt set to work strapping on his knives and belts. Unlike the others, he was more of a soldier than a researcher; he served the Somnambulists as a guard on field missions, taking more than a small amount of pleasure from the travel and exposure to curiosities of all kinds.

He had half-hoped to spot a basilisk on this expedition, although he wasn't entirely certain he could handle such a creature solo.
Their parts sold well on the market, though, so it was worth a shot if one appeared.

Satisfied, he stretched his arms over his head and yawned.

"Well, that'll do for scaring off any beasts in the area," Dorian laughed.

Wiping his hands with a bundle of leaves, Todd shook his head. "We can only hope. Now, you lot ready to go? I want to get a closer look at this before we do anything else."

The group retraced their steps to the fallen idol head, and Todd paused for a moment to examine it carefully.
"Damn, no claw marks or anything. I was hoping..." he trailed off.

"Hoping what?" Gigi frowned, following with the others as the silisk continued ahead, slipping carefully through the dense foliage for a few yards before coming to another stop and pointing.

Kurt was the first to go after him, taking a few steps before swearing loudly and backing away, which only gave Gigi cause to rush ahead-- anything that could coax such a reaction from him had to be worthwhile.

"Alright, you guys. Don't forget, we're here for the idol, okay? We can't let anything else distract u..."

Squeezing past Kurt and Gigi, Dorian stepped into the clearing in awestruck silence.

Just ahead, a stone dragon sat proudly, easily four times as tall as Kurt. Small pieces of rubble spread in the grass around its feet, and its head was gone.

But it was of little concern to the party at the moment.
Several paces behind it was an enormous pit, descending swiftly into darkness save for a few tiny crystals that lined the walls, glowing a vivid violet.

Todd knelt into the grass a short distance away, grinning hard.
"What do you think, guys? The idol can wait, yes?"

Gigi's voice was almost a scream. "Todd, *get away from that!* This idol is no good-- let's get out of here. We can find another one," she insisted.

"Are you serious? No *way!* How often do you think people find things like this? We should go in a bit and see what we can find. It doesn't

look like a miracrystal mine."

"You're right, Todd. It doesn't look like a mine." Gigi was tense. "It looks like a *Boralion tunnel*, which is why--"

Dorian was incredulous. "Boralions! What would a dragon be doing in a place like..." he fell silent, turning to eye the idol.

She shook her head slowly. "They live everywhere, supposedly. They just tunnel underground, and live in the Subterranea. There's no telling what we'd find down there, assuming we survived the trip. Plus, there's the issue of the raw miracrystal we'd be certain to find along the way." Gigi pointed at the glowing shards buried in the walls of the pit. "Where do you think the crystal in the mines around Dreamsong comes from?"

Stubbornly, Todd lowered himself into the pit. "All the more reason to check it out. Look, you know about miracrystal, so you can tell us what to do, or when we're in trouble. If we make it into the Subterranea, we could be the first to report on what's down there! The Project would hail us as heroes-- and we'd probably be set for life," he added.

"But I'm telling you now-- rrgh, *Kurt!*" Gigi gasped, exasperated. "You're not going to just let him--ah, there we go!"

As she spoke, the big man strode over to the pit and knelt down.
Taking Todd's hand, he swung his legs over and climbed in after him.

Gigi scowled. "That was *not* what you were supposed to do."

Dorian placed a hand on Gigi's shoulder. "A brief look inside wouldn't be any real harm, I suppose," he sighed. "How about we go in for an hour or two, and no longer-- and we leave at the first sign of trouble. Fair enough?"

"No matter how you cut it, I think this is idiocy. But if you're all going, it'd be foolish of me to stay out here alone and be eaten."

Dorian and Kurt helped her in as Todd lit a crystal torch, and they headed off into the tunnel.
Dug from soft earth, the walls were surprisingly smooth, save for the tiny crystal shards that studded them here and there, glinting in the soft light of Todd's torch.
The tunnel was easily wide enough for three people to walk through side-by-side, and so Dorian took up the rear, slowly scanning the dirt floor as they went.

"You ever gone underground like this before, Todd?" Kurt's eyes were focused ahead of him despite the swallowing dark, his expression unreadable.

"A few times when I was a newt. My parents were both miracrystal miners, and they took me in to show me and let me look for leftover shards a couple times. Nothing like this, though. None of us ever really questioned how the crystals form in them, though... you think the mines used to be part of burrows like this?"

"Almost certainly," Gigi piped, kneeling momentarily to pluck something from the ground and examine it; Dorian leaned in for a closer look-- it was a flat, disclike object, and dark in the dim light. "When I was growing up, every book I ever read said that Boralion tunnel underground throughout the world. Where they nest, miracrystal forms, and the veil between worlds weakens. That may or may not be true, but the crystal is almost always found underground, and it only forms as a result of Mirajin exposure." She slipped the found object into a pouch on her belt.

"That's kinda neat, really. Did they say anything else about 'em? Boralions, I mean," Todd asked.

"Well, the good news is that they were always portrayed as being pretty friendly, though whether that was Rose propaganda or not is anyone's guess. The bad news is, with all the Mirajin energy they throw off, it doesn't matter too much."

"I dunno, Geeg. That's not much of a big deal, either. I've never gotten sick from it or anything--s'why my people usually work the mines, after all."

But Gigi shook her head and sighed, carefully running an outstretched hand across a wall; the hard-packed dirt had transitioned into pockmarked stone at some point. "Not for *you*, Todd, no. But you have to keep in mind that all three of us are *human*. We're not as magic-resilient as you, which is only one of several reasons I don't think we should be in here."

The silisk came to a stop, frowning as he turned to glance at Kurt. "... I hadn't thought of that," he admitted. "Do you really think it'll be a problem?"

Gigi and Todd continued their discussion in the background as Dorian squinted, leaning against a stone wall to lie his ear against it.
He could hear a faint, buzzing hum in the tunnel, as well as what sounded like voices in the distance, but may have simply been an echo.
After listening carefully for a moment, he decided to ignore it, instead turning his attention back to his companions.

"Well, you know, Todd-- we've already come down here, so we may as well keep going for now. We've only been walking for about twenty minutes, if I had to guess. Besides, you might be right-- if this *does* lead into the Subterranea, it might be worth the risk, even though I wish we had proper equipment for this sort of thing. So c'mon, then. Time's wasting."
Slipping past Todd and Kurt to the front of the group, she snatched the torch from the silisk and marched onward into the darkness.

Time seemed to muddy as the group continued deeper into the Boralion tunnel, which slowly grew more cavernous, small clusters of miracrystal appearing upon the walls and ceiling along with stalactites and stalagmites.
Their footsteps echoed softly through the caves, seeming to whisper into Dorian's ears in wispy and ethereal voices that put him on edge.
Time's wasting... I don't think we should be in here, they mumured, and he grit his teeth together and shivered; it had been far too long for Gigi's words to echo back now, let alone in the *wrong order*.

But she and Kurt carried on wordlessly and without complaint, so he kept his worries to himself.

A soft light ahead seemed to illuminate the tunnel; Todd blinked his three eyes to ensure he wasn't seeing things before hurrying ahead.
"Oh... *wow*," he breathed.
Just around the bend, the path opened up into a wide cavern, sparkling with thousands of glowing crystals from end to end. A small, round pool of clear sat in the middle of the floor, fed by several streams and teeming with tiny fish with brilliant, rainbow scales.

"*This,*" Kurt announced, slack-jawed, "is why I took this job."
Slowly, he descended into the main cavern, gazing at the crystalline walls and the pristine little spring. Dorian and Todd trailed along after him, starstruck with the beauty of the place.

Gigi stayed put, frowning slightly and reaching to brush her fingers lightly across a chain tucked beneath her shirt. The pendant that hung from it had grown uncomfortably warm-- a sure sign that it was doing its job, but...
She shook her head. She had warned them often enough; speaking up now would make no difference.

"You know, big guy," Todd began, "I didn't expect you to have a thing for this kinda stuff when we first met. I feel sort of bad for making that assumption now."

Kurt waved his hand dismissively. "Don't."
Without warning, he drew one of his hunting knives and started towards the silisk at once, his eyes fierce and full of intent.

"My word!" Dorian shouted, wincing as his voice bounced across the walls, "Kurt, *stop*--"

"Erk," said Todd.

Kurt slammed his knife into the wall just past Todd's head. Pressing in hard, he wriggled it, twisted, and popped off a chunk of miracrystal as large as his head.
"That'll do it," he said coolly.

Shock fading, Todd roared. "What *in the hell,* Kurt?! You scared me near to death!"

Kurt ignored him, unbuckling his bag to slip the stone inside and walking away, heading halfway across the room before finally responding. "Come on, now-- I thought you knew me better than that. Are you coming?"

Bristling, Todd followed him around the spring and into a passage on the other side of the cavern. Dorian and Gigi watched them go, the latter pursing her lips in silent fury.

"Gigi?" Dorian's voice was gentle.

"Both of them are idiots. This isn't what we were sent up here to do," she said, sitting down on the cool stone floor and wrapping her arms around her knees. "It would've been too simple to send a lodica back with news of this tunnel and let a more prepared expedition come down here. The best case scenario at this point is you *not* falling ill by some fluke, but the longer we stay, the more I suspect someone is going to get hurt, be it either of you, or whoever Kurt ends up selling that hunk of raw crystal to."

Dorian rose an eyebrow; Gigi seemed to be excluding herself from the equation for some reason. He was considering asking her why when something large scurried over his foot.
With a shriek, he kicked outwards and backed away, his face ashen.

"Everything alright up there?" came Todd's voice, distorted by distance, echo, and the reverberation of the crystals nearby.
"Dorian... wait here, and for the love of everything with a brain, don't touch *anything*, do you hear me?" Gigi reached out to squeeze his hand before rushing off after the other two, drawing in a breath for a reprimand at the top of her lungs as she went.

Shaken, it was all Dorian could do to sit down and watch the fish, taking deep breaths in an attempt to relax. Without other voices in the cavern with him, he noticed almost at once that the crystals themselves were the source of the low hum.

He also noticed dark shapes in the cracks and crevices of the walls; shapes with tiny, glittering eyes that all seemed focused upon him.
They leered and scowled out at him, gnashing teeth that he could just make out from within the inky shadows.
Who are you-- what are you? They murmured in a low drone that seemed to buzz in his ears in perfect time with the crystals' hum.
You don't belong down here. You should leave, before we eat you.
The voices took on a querying tone, as if considering this prospect.

"I-I don't think that will be necessary," Dorian stammered, slowly rising to his feet again and glancing toward the way he had come.
"I'll leave now. I won't come ba--"

The stalagtites and stalagmites in the room suddenly seemed to leap into new formations; the floor lurched beneath him, and he tumbled onto something slick and warm.

A gurgling voice shook the room, bringing gusts of dank and humid air whirling around Dorian's face.

It's much too late for that.

Around the corner and down the passage, Todd, Kurt and Gigi heard Dorian's desperate and horrified scream.

Hurrying back into the main cavern, they found him curled upon the floor and trembling, his eyes wide and staring, the whites glinting in the crystals' light.

Kurt gathered him up in his arms as Gigi glowered at the big man.
"It's time to go. *Now*."

Gigi sat next to Dorian as he lay comatose atop several of their sleeping bags, his skin clammy and hands trembling.
Despite her reluctance to reveal it, she had finally decided to place her dreamshard around his neck, though she feared it may already have been too late.

Stoic and silent, Kurt stood beside a tree nearby, keeping watch for the return of Gigi's lodica-- hopefully with word of the Somnambulists on their way with relief. In the background, Todd carefully studied the idol and the area around it, keeping a healthy distance from Gigi as she monitored Dorian's condition and jotted hasty notes into her field journal.

"You're going to sell that hunk of raw crystal, I take it," she said to Kurt, her voice deadpan.

"Maybe, maybe not. I work for the Somnambulists to see unusual things. Sometimes, I might wanna collect them for myself, too. We'll see."

She said nothing.
Dorian was a friend, and had family to go home to. She'd tend to him as best she could, and see to it that he had proper care if the worst came to pass.
As far as she was concerned, Kurt and Todd could take care of themselves at this point.

The search party arrived just as the suns were beginning to set. The trees in the area were too dense for the carriage to come all the way through, so Dorian was loaded onto a stretcher and carried out to the nearest road.

"He's suffering from acute mirajin poisoning, possibly with damage to the brain. He has a wife in Gier who should be contacted, but I'd like to have a medical mirologist brought down from Chimre to look at him."

"Of course, Miss Urbain. And what of you and the others?" The physician scrawled quick notes onto his pad as the group climbed into the carriage.

"We're fine," Kurt answered shortly.

"Yes," Gigi agreed, glancing away. "The rest of us are fine."

Book IV Chapter 14: Bloodhawk

The Aviary
Cathedral of a Thousand Roses
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Rich sunlight poured in from above as a multitude of hawks circled and sat overhead, stretching their wings, preening, watching.

Bastion sat far below, feeling rather melancholy despite himself. Lifting a gloved hand, he whistled sharply, and one of the little bloodhawks seemed to fall from midair to perch neatly upon it.

He smiled, though it was faint and troubled, full of sadness and thought and perhaps more than a little regret. Gently, he ran his free hand over the little bird's head, and it enjoyed the attention.

He had known them, once.

Surely, he knew them now, but... things had changed.
He loved the brave little creatures with all his heart (so much so that he had taken their name, back when Nef had presented him with them), and they were as fond of him as ever, as were the other raptors he cared for here, including a few falcons and a pair of great eagles that his husband hunted with on occasion.

But something precious and sacred had been lost along the way, perhaps as a consequence from having been away from his homeland for so long, perhaps out of simple misuse.

He could speak to them, once. But not now-- not anymore.
He knew how to command them, and they worked with him happily, but the language was gone, long forgotten.

Lifting his hand to dismiss the little hawk, Bast rose to his feet and crossed the circular room, leaning against the mesh to gaze out at the city of shining white and gold below, past the Cathedral's sprawling green gardens and little flocks of wandering swans and peacocks.

Shaking his head slowly, he sighed. Perhaps Sasha had been too kind to him.

Living like this, he was hardly even a Speaker anymore either, was he?

Book IV Chapter 15: Courier

"Caz, what have you been up to? You haven't stopped by for a while, and I'm a little bit worried. Is everything alright? I'm going to come around with a few presents today. Love you, see you soon."

Elliot carefully slid open her office window and extended her hand; the little black hummingbird buzzed off into the distance.

Once you complete your assignment in Aensdoun, you will be reassigned to the Silent Rose Main Branch in Laps-du-Ment, Chimre.

Gabriel played the message on the lodica over and over again, pressing a hand against his mouth.

Chimre. *Chimre.*
He had lived and worked in Axl all his life, and now work demanded he travel from one side of Valenth to the other.

If he lived through Aensdoun, it was possible he would be set for life, thanks to the Organization.

If he lived.

He took a deep breath, sending the lodica back the way it came before withdrawing his own, and beginning a new message to his brother...

"Thank you for your report, Praviidan. I'll send a few teams back over to Soril in a couple days' time to survey and reclaim the area. Hopefully we can be back home before the year is out. I've called our allies for assistance in removing the amol from the area. Lucsus will be ours again. For now, await a lodica from each of the reclamation teams.

Grand Rajiin Sadinha out."

Two tiny paws carefully held a gleaming golden scarab up to the light.
Giving the automaton a fond pat on the head, Sadinha sat it atop the balcony railing, watching as it crawled a few steps forward before spreading its wings and taking flight, swallowed up quickly by the blue sky above.

"Lyric. *Lyric! Where in Hel are you?* You will not *believe* what's happened. Where do I begin? Dilndrou... he's alive! He's real, and he's come back. He's in Lassenbhurg right now, and he says he wants to meet you!
"Tell the rest of the band to come back too, okay? We can put on our concert now. I bet he'd *love* to see!"

Harley could barely contain her excitement as she recorded her message on the little wasp robot; it wiggled its antennae slowly as she prattled at it, giving a warning beep as she ran out of space.

The silisk rushed over to the window to let the mechanical insect fly off in search of its intended recipient, then spun on her heel to smile fondly at the scaly gray man-- her *Bapa*-- behind her.

The Silisk God smiled.

"He will come?"

"He'll come. He's *got to!*"

Harley was thrilled that Dilndrou was so eager to meet her friends. She couldn't believe that her people had all gone on for so long without ever truly knowing their Father personally, like their ancestors had.

That would all change now.

The wasp wandered in lazy circles atop well-used, calloused hands, flexing its wings slowly as it went.

"Anom, when you finish with the human woman, you're to release her into my care. I hope you haven't traumatized her too much; I'd hate to have to have Master Dreamscar put you on observation."

The white-haired *Aeneski* licked his lips and frowned. He was too young to have an authoritative voice; he rather wished someone else could keep correspondance with the Houselord.

But he knew his place, he was sure. The two-jawed beast wouldn't dare question his commands, even if he was hardly into his thirties.

Despite all appearances, he was the superior here.

He sent the lodica away through the window, and turned to return to his workdesk.

The blueprints would need finalization before before the moon rose.

"My name is Cazwell Christoph. I'm of the understanding that you have procedures capable of reversing leupak transformations... I'd like to schedule one. Price is no concern, I just... I need to be myself again, whatever that involves. I'll be in Chimre from the nineteenth on, so any appointment date beyond that is possible. Thank you."

Cazwell took his claw away from the recording button, gingerly turning the little lodica in his fingers to examine it.
He had just purchased it on the way to his flat; the rubber coating it was shiny and new, and its little dragonfly body flexed slowly as it waited for a command.

Rising slowly onto his hind legs, he walked to the front door to release it into the world.
As the lodica fluttered away, a second one landed neatly in his empty paws, folding its little wings in against its side and beeping twice.

A hummingbird lodica.
Elliot's.

With a sigh, Cazwell listened to the recording before placing the little bird in a lockbox and sliding it under the bed.

It beeped and fluttered frantically inside as he packed his suitcase.

Book IV Chapter 16: Lassenbhurg

Lassenbhurg, Liasse

The Mages' city was a source of constant fascination to the old alligator.
Teeming with people of all species and sorts, it was an ecosystem in its own right, nothing like the tiny *Aeneski* villages of old, or even the much grander Elysian societies he had grown up around.
The dragon-people had been incredibly intolerant of any other sentient creatures, save for the avatars and servants chosen by their gods, and the tiny, soft-skinned elves had behaved similarly despite being vastly different at first glance.

Mortal creatures so rarely got the bigger picture, it seemed.
And yet, here was Lassenbhurg-- a triumph of life, science, and magic rolled into one spectacular and beautiful city.
Common folk lived alongside magi and scholars-- and even, fascinatingly, *humanoid elementals* that strutted in and out of the cities as free as the wind.

And sapient creatures weren't the only ones to be found.
The people of Liasse shared their home with griffins, much to Dilndrou's surprise and delight; the beasts looked little like the children of Aqk and Dietrich who had been their predecessors, but their origin was still clear.
Content to assist the magi, they carried riders and goods through and across the city.
Far from the only bestial denizens of the great city, dogs and cats scampered through the streets on leash as well as on their own, hunting one another, or the colorful little paco that scurried behind crates, across roads or into buildings when doors were open and owners weren't looking.

Despite himself, Dilndrou found himself smiling as he watched one shuffle through a kitchen window.

He continued his walk with a great deal of serenity, finally coming to a stop within one of the city's parks just as a gaudily-decorated carriage pulled to a stop at the side of the road, the door slowly swinging open.

His little friend Harley would likely arrive a few minutes late and from the opposite direction; he had asked her to run a few simple errands for him, which she accepted eagerly.

The Silisk had drifted so far from him, so long ago, and their faith and belief in him kept them unshakingly loyal through centuries of having never known him.

How curious.

"Hey! You must be the guy Harley told me about, right? I'm Lyric'ai."

Dilndrou rose his head to meet the gaze of the black-haired elven boy approaching him and smiled. "Lyric'ai-- what a lovely name. Like Lyric'ai Dreamscar, yes?"

Lyric faltered, the warmth fading from his face swiftly.

"...who are you?"

Book IV Chapter 17: Dragonsong

Schalle's Heart Park
Lassenbhurg, Liasse

"...who are you?" Behind his hair, Lyric's eyes narrowed as he came to a stop.

Lyric imagined himself an easy-going person, amicable and reasonably simple to get along with. He was used to excitable fans invading his personal space and privacy to get closer to him, learn a little bit more, perhaps get their hands on his autograph or, in worst cases, a lock of his hair.

That was nothing; small, petty stuff that could be forgiven and forgotten with a smile and a laugh. Details of his mortal life were up for grabs-- it was simply part of the life of a celebrity.

This was *too far*.

Knowing *who* he was meant knowing *what* he was, and he had put far too much effort into hiding that. "Answer me. *Who are you?!"* he demanded, his voice quavering.

"Your companion spoke the truth. I am Dilndrou, father of the Silisk and founder of alchemy. I mean you no harm," the creature responded coolly. "I do have a few questions for you, however. Would you walk with me?"

"No."

Lyric's answer was swift and sharp. Spinning on his heel, he turned to leave the way he had come.

A harsh wind suddenly buffeted him, throwing him against something solid. The robed man, before him once again, clutched Lyric's shoulders gently.

"Your father. Where is he?"

"I will tell you *NOTHING!"*

Furious, Lyric swung his arm, hurling Dilndrou into a nearby bush. Clenching his teeth in a soft growl, he watched and waited, oblivious to the sound of footfall behind him.

"Lyri, you alright? What's up-- where's Bapa Dilndrou and the rest of the band?"

"...Harley, go back to the hotel. I'll meet you shortly," was Lyric's only reply, his voice strained.

"Fret not, child. I'm right here." Climbing to his feet and brushing dirt from his robe, Dilndrou smiled calmly. "If you could leave us for just a moment? We were having a friendly dis--"

"*Charlatan!* You've been lying to these people... to get at *me?* To get at my *father?* I don't know who or what you are, but I won't stand for it. Harley, *get out of here!"*

"...your *father?*" Stubbornly, the silisk rose an eyebrow. "But you said you never knew your family. What's even going on?!"

Lyric pushed away gently. "The only ones I'm going to speak to right now are the Archmagi of Liasse. If you'll excuse me..."

"Dnakl fjar esskla iggth nuk ten," Dilndrou whispered.

Again, the winds began to blow, the trees of the park swaying violently in the gale; passers-by who had been wandering closer to see the nearby argument ducked and covered their heads as fallen leaves and branches tumbed through the air.

Crying out in shock, Lyric'ai grabbed Harley's arm and pulled her out of the way as several trees bent unnaturally towards them, branches pressing into the grass where they had stood just moments before, grasping like talons.

"Lyri, wait-- isn't this kinda rash?!"

But the black-haired Aeneski clenched his teeth as they began to run. "Don't you *get it,* Harley? *He's* behind this mess!"

Rushing down the path towards the main city, Lyric and Harley skidded to a stop as the trees before them crashed into the earth, weaving their branches together to form an impassible wall.
Whipping his head around, Lyric watched as Dilndrou slowly approached, the thrashing trees pulling aside to let him pass.

He came to a stop just close enough for them to hear, his expression unreadable as two towering trees pulled up their roots behind him and moved to stand guard, their branches hanging like arms at their sides, their tops turning this way and that as if to look around, suddenly aware of everything all at once.

"Let's stop this game before it begins," Dilndrou said patiently, his braid and robes billowing in the wind. "You will help me find Nefirian one way or another, boy. You've one more chance to cooperate-- I am old beyond your imagination and just as weary, and I have *no patience* for disobedience."

"Lyri, I dunno know what he wants, b-but... please, maybe give him a chance to say his piece?" Harley pleaded, all three eyes wide and fearful. “I'm sure this can all be worked out, yeah...?”

Turning to look at her companion, Harley suddenly jerked away with a shriek.
Lyric's hair fluttered away from his eyes in the strong wind; they burned with an eerie yellow light. He did not answer her, instead leaning forward into the wind, his face twisted and feral.

"I am *not* my father's keeper, nor am I any subordinate of yours. Stop this wretched sorcery and let us go. *Now.*"

Dilndrou's face fell; behind him, the tree-golems shifted in the wind, watching without eyes. "Very well, boy. This shall be swift-- I have no desire to cause harm here."

Raising a clawed hand towards them, the scaled man began to chant. Behind him, the guardian trees grew restless, digging their limbs into the soft earth as tiny roots sprouted beneath Lyric's feet.

Terrified, Harley ran to Dilndrou, arms extended. "Bapa, *please!* We can talk about this!"

But Lyric'ai ignored her, watching in silence as the little roots grew, coiling around the toes of his boots and his ankles, slowly making their way up his legs, tugging his feet into the soil.

With a leathery pop, twin wings tore out from Lyric's back, beating powerfully against the wind. He pulled his feet easily from the grass and leapt into the air, his garments fading into his scales as his disguise melted away.

Hovering over the clearing, the Boralion hissed from between his teeth, surveying his surroundings. Below, Dilndrou watched with fascination-- Harley had fallen onto her knees nearby, gazing up in terror.

But across the wooden barrier, a crowd had gathered; several people pointed at the flying beast above as magi attempted to dispel the magic that had warped the trees, closing off the park entrance.

They couldn't know of Dilndrou's involvement in this, not from where they were. They would believe he was wreaking some form of havoc within.

Rising high into the air, Lyric'ai opened his great maw and began to sing, the soft hum of his crystalline wings deepening in tone and buzzing through the air in harmony.

Harley was the first to react to the ethereal sound; eyelids drooping, the fear drained away from her heart, her mind growing cloudy and sluggish. With a breathless sigh, she dropped bodily into the grass, curled onto her side, and fell asleep.
On the opposite side of the barrier, the spectators began to drop down onto the ground in twos and threes, falling into deep, peaceful slumber. Even the magi fell victim, although they were the last to submit, struggling to lift their heads towards the sky before forgetting their troubles and closing their eyes at last.

The mortals would sleep, and dream, and forget. Lyric'ai felt apologetic for the deed, but only trouble could befall them if word of his appearance spread.

His task completed, he turned to flee the scene-- only to discover rolling stormclouds above him. Several heavy raindrops plopped upon his broad nose, and then the sky tore open at once, rain battering relentlessly against his mighty wings.

Shocked, he glanced at the people sleeping obliviously below. If the freak storm carried on like this, they might be washed away-- or worse, someone may drown.
But the spell couldn't be broken prematurely, and Lyric cursed under his breath just seconds before a massive bolt of lightning crashed into his back.

He dropped from the sky, his limbs paralyzed as the electricity coursed through him; the mighty crash shook the earth, leaving a huge crater in the soft ground.

Dazed, the boralion watched groggily as the roots broke through the soil again, much larger than before.
They wrapped tightly around his numb body, anchoring him to the ground as he twitched weakly, his limbs trying in vain to heed his commands.

The sky had been clear just minutes before; the winds calm.

Aching and helpless, the Boralion Prince dropped his head onto the ground, his heart thundering in his great chest.

"Nn-nnever help you," he managed to groan as Dilndrou and his trees approached, one gingerly carrying the sleeping Harley in a leafy branch. He spat at them, and missed.

"I'm over that already," the scaly man sighed, whispering a few words in his strange, eldritch language.
The coiling roots wrapped Lyric up from head to toe, leaving room only for him to see and breathe, and the sudden rainstorm and wind seemed to dissolve away as though they had never been at all.

Lyric'ai shivered, as much from the damp cold as from a sudden, growing horror as the robed creature watched him intently.

"Dd...dilndrou," he mouthed.

"Yes," the beast-god replied, folding his arms across his chest. "Had you listened, this could have been as simple and painless as can be, and would have saved me a great deal of time. However, that's neither here nor there now."

"Your father," Dilndrou said, "will come."

Book IV Chapter 18: Leash

Soril City, Lucsus

Seated upon an overturned and long-abandoned kiosk, a chimaera ran his fingertip over the sleek body of a wasp lodica, its wings slowly spreading and turning.
In the deep shadows of the cavern-city, he could see shapes shuffling to and fro down the otherwise empty streets; mechanical beasts dragging carts full of comatose forms away for shipping.

The bioluminescent shelf fungus that thrived in this environment was the only light, as it had been since the Amol had run them out of their home months past; it glowed a soft blue, imparting a ghostly look to their surroundings.

From the backs of one of the carts, a massive, clawed hand reached slowly into the air.
The automaton pulling the load stopped immediately and turned; a flash of violet light and the harsh buzz of energy, and the creature fell still once more. Satisfied, the automaton continued along on its way.

The chimaera sighed. They would have their city back soon, without a doubt, and perhaps the vermin who took it from them would have second thoughts before striking again, now.

They had sent diggers down into the tunnels that led into the city, and now the amol were being subdued and taken away. *Alive.*

He didn't know why.

He didn't *wish to know.*

As the last of the carts rumbled away into the distance, he turned his lodica's recorder on, speaking to it in hushed tones.

"Soril City is clear. I repeat, *Soril City is clear.* Thirteen amol have been captured and are in processing as I record this message. One automatonic unit was damaged during recovery and is being returned for repairs.
"Awaiting further orders. Over."

Sending the robotic insect away, he reached into a pocket within his vest, withdrawing a tiny syringe full of milky white liquid.

He leaned his back firmly against the sandstone wall, sliding the needle into his forearm between the scales.

Slowly, his vision fuzzed, then faded away to black.

Vale Danse, Chimre

Something pinged repeatedly against the glass of the office window; with mild irritation, she slid from her overstuffed office chair, placing her fingertips under the pane to slide it open.

The creature darted inside, buzzing incessantly as it alighted atop her desk; she slapped her palm over it, and it grew silent.

Picking it up by a wing, she pressed the button and listened to the gruff voice as the recording played.

"Soril City is clear. I repeat, Soril City is clear..."

She sat the lodica down again, scrawling quick notes into a book as it continued. Satisfied, she tucked her auburn hair back behind an ear, settling into her chair once more.

"The sooner Soril is running again, the the better. You all know we can't sell our entire miracrystal stock ourselves, or things would look suspicious. I want that city repopulated before the month is out-- we'll send along a new shipment of seed crystal, as well as enough other goods to pick up the slack. But get yourselves situated, first. I'll update the Grand Rajiin."

She all but hurled the little lodica back out the window before returning to her notebook. The chimaera made such good little pets when they were selling their stock instead of sitting on their asses and mewling.

It'd be her head if those underground markets weren't up and running again soon.

Book IV Epilogue

Axl, South Dreamsong

"I don't get why you hafta hold out on us like this, Gabe. Look at you, flashing around your fancy-schmancy techno-toys. Lodi.. whatever it is. If you have the money for junk like this, you can spare a little more to help us keep things go--"

With a furious snarl, Gabriel backhanded the little hummingbird lodica; it flew into a wall with a loud crack, dropping to the floor and fluttering on its side.

His last message to Hans before he prepared for his likely ill-fated trip to Aensdoun had been warm and friendly; he had sent the lodica to carry his goodbyes to his brother in his own voice, wish him well with his work and offer to buy him drinks if-- *when* he returned home to Dreamsong.

The return message had been little more than a slap to the face, dripping with the entitlement he had come to expect from his older brother.

"I am so sick of this. He prances about, singing and dancing on stage-- performing, *enjoying himself!* And I have to actually work for a living. Is there any wonder I'm not completely broke? It's not as if I'm *drinking myself to death* with my wages!"

Hurling himself onto his bed, Gabe folded his arms behind his head and stared up towards the ceiling, his anger coursing red-hot through his veins.

He'd worked for what he had so far, and like hell was he going to let anyone-- least of all some leech of a brother-- drag him down and sabotage it.

"Get *bent, Hans,*" Gabe muttered, turning onto his side and closing his eyes, ignoring the distressed lodica flopping about nearby.

It was company-issued; he could get a new one before he shipped out.

Schalle's Heart Park
Lassenbhurg, Liasse

The vines were too thick from him to escape from, but he could still peer through them.
With a growl low in his throat, Lyric'ai watched as the tiny reptilian figure below paced slowly before him, impatient but sure of himself.

"If I had understood just what was before me, I would have kept him when he came to Aensdoun," Dilndrou mused. "This... substance, this warped magic... I have been studying it for quite some time now. I noticed that it had affected the three Speakers even then, but never did I *imagine* that my own pupil could be responsible for such... corruption.
"I dislike such foul play as involving a child in personal matters, but... we are *all part of this.*"

The Boralion Prince was unamused; lashing his tail, he glowered. "Your own... pupil? What are you *on about?"*

Dilndrou shook his head slowly. "If you don't know your father's tale, boy, you'll learn it soon enough. He is only one tiny piece of a greater cycle that spans thousands of years before his people came to be... and it seems as though they will only repeat those mistakes unless

something is done to stop it.
"Tell me, what do you know about the Elysians? Do they teach *that*, at least? I shall begin there..."

As Lyric'ai opened his mouth to speak, a gentle presence materialized within the corners of his mind, its melodic voice resonating within.

I will be free soon. Are you coming to help?

I cannot come anywhere right now.

But you must-- oh.
...I see.
We are coming.

Don't come just carry on without me I'm fine I don't know what this creature wants but you musn't come--

We are coming.
It will be alright, Crystal-son.

Dilndrou had fallen eerily silent.
Coming out of his trance, Lyric'ai writhed within his bonds before glancing down upon him again to find the creature meeting his gaze with an expression of shock.

"... Perhaps I was incorrect about your involvement in this," he said, his lips pursed. "You are channeling it as well-- *I felt it.*"

Slowly, carefully, a vine began to wrap around Lyric'ai's throat.

"I will learn everything I must from your father... But this changes everything. I cannot allow you to live."

Gier, South Dreamsong

"If anyone wants to stay in this hellhole of a city, let them," Sadinha barked from atop the head of one of her royal guards, standing atop the stairs of Gier's aeroport. "We have an obligation to reclaim our city. Any dens or possessions found abandoned will be confiscated immediately-- we return home, and we *return to business!*"

Sadinha's little ears thundered with the jubilant cries of her people; she knew they would be as eager to leave as she was.
Even with the chimaera as united as they had ever been, she felt powerless and insignificant here-- this was not chimaera government, or chimaera land, and chimaera ideals were unwelcome in this strange little country run by humankin.

A sucker was born every minute here, and yet, for every stolen purse, every con and every hard-won bag of krus there was a mercenary, good samaritan or officer ready to fight to return it to the original owner.
There was no sport or honor in such meaningless and demeaning activities, but the number of chimaera being left behind in Gier and Axl's dungeons were a testament to how often such arguments were won.

Relief couldn'tve come swiftly enough.

As the Luxi-built zeppelins drifted into the aeroport, the crowds shifted forward, families huddling close to one another and people of all ages and sizes threatening away hands wandering towards pockets and bags.

No one could wait for a chance to give someone a sound thrashing for touching their belongings; chimaera were more than capable of solving their problems and scuffles themselves.

Hidden deep within the crush of people loading onto the zeppelins, another chimaera grinned to herself, her cut-horn pipe clenched between her teeth.
"If that little runt leupak survived the night... there's *no way* he'll manage to get his money out of me now," she purred, looking forward to all of the luxuries her krus would buy her back home.

The Swanheart Cosmo-Firm
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Her shoes came down hard against marble stairs; her hands shoved open a pair of ornate double-doors (steel decorated with a flurry of angelic-looking creatures and swans in different stages of flight, arching over the little windows in an elegant dance).

Her explosive entry drew the attention of everyone in the lobby, including the clerks at the desk.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but please don't ru-- hey, *wait!* Do you have an appointment?!" they called.

She ignored them.

The deep cerulean carpeting was plush and springy beneath her feet; she nearly lost her balance for a moment, but recovered by leaning into one of the stark-white walls of the hallway.

She upset a framed photo on her way; a scowling young man superimposed over the same fellow, now beaming and showing off a pair of massive pearly wings.
The carpeting kept the glass from shattering; someone would be by to replace it later, after the chaos was over.

She ran; through the labyrinthine halls and up several flights of stairs; *A level, B level, C level.*
Shoulder-first, she barreled through the D-level doors, pausing for just a moment to catch her breath.

Okay now; *keep going*.

No time.

Breaking into a run once more, she narrowly dodged a Cosmo on her way out of a room; startled, the woman pressed herself against the wall and watched her turn the corner; as an afterthought, she sighed, reaching back into the room to press an alert button.

So many patients lost their nerve at the last minute, but it didn't matter.
Once you agreed to the procedure, the money was nonrefundable.

D-18.

Elliot shoved the operation room doors hard enough to leave dents in the flawless walls behind them.
The Docs stopped, holding a mask, a needle, a container full of tiny bottles.

On the operating table just beyond them, two gray ears stood upright, their owner's face obstructed by the people around him.

"CAZWELL!" Elliot screamed.

Book V Prologue

Wrapping tightly around his throat like a tentacle, the rogue vine threatened to crush Lyric'ai's neck. Struggling to right himself, he thrashed within his prison, gasping for breath, desperate to break free, to fight back-- even, perhaps, to simply scream.

Dilndrou, the accursed lizard-spawn standing just yards away from him, close enough to slice in half with a single flick of a claw, watched in attentive silence, his expression grim.

What did this thing have to do with his father? Why was it so intent on his arrival-- and how could it have possibly sensed his brief conversation with the Fatis Mirajin?
The crystal's influence had created him; its power coursed through his body, but it was his alone to hear and answer.

The Firestarters and his brother's ilk had always been sensitive to mirajin energy, but none of them would have been capable of such a feat, even with considerable effort.

The vine squeezed hard, and the Boralion Prince's eyes rolled back.
He had a minute's worth of air left before he lost consciousness, if he simply relaxed; there was little sense in struggling now, if it meant...

Something bright caught Lyric's eye, across the clearing and behind the mage; he squinted to bring it into focus.

A pool of sticky, bright pink ichor had begun to form in the grass; where it made contact, the blades immediately transformed-- some crystallizing, others mutating into alien flowers, reaching tendrils and even tiny serpents that writhed and coiled blindly.

A flash of light cut through the air just above it, peeling away like a shed skin, sucking away into a hole in the face of reality itself.

Out from the aetherhole stepped a round, white-clad figure, followed closely behind by a taller, lankier second, suited in black and sporting a shock of brilliant blue hair.

Just as Dilndrou had insisted, his father had arrived-- along with, of all people, Didier, the Glass Marionette pianist!
Despite himself, Lyric'Ai thrashed in his bonds again with a desperate hiss as his vision began to blur.

If he made it out of this alive, he would have far too much to try to salvage...

"There he is, behind... *who is that?!*"

The crystal had alerted him to his son's trauma just moments earlier, prompting Nefirian to travel through the Reverie in search of him.
While his haste was initially dulled by confusion-- what could prove a threat to Lyric? Had Valdren decided to make his move?-- the sudden pain that echoed through the psychic connection they shared put his doubts to rest at once.

Now, stepping through the portal and into the waking world again, the vision before him struck fear into his heart.

He knew Dilndrou would come looking for him sooner or later, but he had never *dreamt* that he might target his family to lure him.

Before the Chapter had uttered a word, his companion had already sized up the situation and taken command, launching himself at full speed across the damp grass and into the fray.
With a powerful leap, the blue-haired *Aeneski* crashed into Dilndrou, wrapping his arms tightly around his waist before biting into his shoulder.

"What in the--?!"
The Beast-god's concentration broken, his vines began to falter, loosening around Lyric'ai's body and releasing their chokehold.
Furious, the dragon spread his wings and bellowed, struggling to his feet and greedily sucking in air as his eyes darted around him.

His head spun; his few minutes trapped within Dilndrou's vines had been enough for the bastard's tree-constructs to disappear with Harley.
He hoped the silisk god wouldn't harm one of his own--

...but why had Didier appeared with his father as though they were friends, and why was the musician now *chewing at Dilndrou's throat?*

His questions would have to wait, however. "Didier, *look out!"*

Having overcome his shock, Dilndrou flung the elf away from him and across the muddy lawn with a low growl. Skidding across the wet earth upon his back, Didier got to his feet again with a harsh, barking laugh, brushing the mud from his slacks.

"You let your guard down, arsehole. Shall we see how you like your own medicine?"

"You idiot, *DON'T! He's a--"*

Didier threw his head and arms back triumphantly-- before unleashing an agonizing shriek.
His body distorted before their eyes, scales sprouting over his flesh as his face stretched into something eerily crocodilian; a tail uncoiled from his spine, trembled, then dissolved into thin air again. "I-- I-- AAIIIIIGH! What is-- *N-NO!"*

Lyric'ai and his father watched in horror as the elf's form fluctuated and writhed, shifting into a mimicry of Dilndrou's, then a half-humanoid alligator, then Didier and back again.

Finally, he dropped to his knees with a trembling groan, foaming at the mouth.
Nefirian rushed to his side, carefully lifting him."Damnit... are you alright?"

"I... I've been better, I can't... lie," Didier laughed weakly, then retched, his lips dripping dark crimson."What in the fuck *is that thing?"*

"That's *Dilndrou,"* Nef said, his voice deadpan.

"... ugh... why didn't you warn me?"

"I hate to interrupt your discussion," Dilndrou droned, clutching his wounded shoulder with one eyebrow raised, "but I have business.
With *you*."

Nefirian's eyes narrowed. "Attacking my son to gain my attention... *and ire*. I expected something with a bit more discretion and finesse from you, Dilndrou. Oh, how the mighty have fallen..."

"Haven't you grown cocky. And massive, to boot," the silisk god added. "Has your... *Fatis Mirajin* so perfectly clouded your better judgement? You were a fine student, you know..."

"Don't *lie*. I could hardly command the elements to do my bidding. Some harbinger of destruction I turned out to be. *Ban'leane. Witch-child*, they called me, and I could barely summon a golem from the cess pit you called a home," the Chapter hissed. "The Fatis Mirajin was the first noteworthy thing I had ever created... and it was an *accident!* I didn't understand it at first... I couldn'tve, and..."

"...and it destroyed the *Aen'och Trior* as a result," Dilndrou finished with a whisper. "That is why you vanished, and why the communal grounds became a ghostland. Your Mirajin caused the destruction of your--*OUR people*..."

"And in the end, they still called me *ban'leane*, you know. They screamed and gurgled and croaked at me that my destiny had been realized because of your mercy... that *you* had forced them to let me live, and granted me the means to destroy the Three Tribes! Superstitious wretches.
"And their beloved Kelan... he ran away with *me!*"

For a few moments, the clearing fell silent.
Lyric'Ai watched from the tangle of vines, not truly comprehending what he was hearing, as his father held the sickened Didier in his arms as though he were some second, secret son.

And Dilndrou, Father Alchemy, lord of the silisks, seemed to share a long-distant memory with him.

"The survivors hated me with all their hearts-- hah, well, more than they ever had before, anyway. They hated all of us, me for bringing doom, Bastion for simply having bedded me... and Kelan, for *failing* to live up to the destiny they wove for him. He was meant to be the hero of the *Trior*, and instead he sympathized with me, *befriended me*... and was affected by my 'curse', or so they believed.
The things I saw them become, the horrific, nightmare creatures the Mirajin made out of them... and they could still manage to spew such hatred from their twisted maws. To think I felt pity for them at first, guilt for what had come about by freak accident." Nefirian laughed harshly. "They would have killed me as a *child* if you hadn't stopped them. They hated *you* for that, and they hated me for winning the protection of the *Mod'han*.
"If they could have, they would have killed *you* for interfering."

Sadness filled Dilndrou's eyes. "Fae will be fae, brutal, vengeful, and narcissistic to the very end. If there is one thing I have learned in all these millenia, it is that. But that is irrelevant, I am afraid.
"Nefirian... you *must* let me see the Fatis Mirajin. It has changed you and the other Speakers irrevocably, and I am without a doubt in my mind that it is doing the very same to Valenth itself. It is simply too much for the planet to bear such a--"

"*No*." Still clutching Didier to his chest, the little Chapter scowled. "If there is anything I regret, it's not having brought it to you when I first created it. But that is far, far in the past now, Dilndrou, and the crystal is far too powerful for you to stand before--"

"Don't be a *fool*, Nefirian!" Dilndrou snapped, his anger returning. "Your Fatis Mirajin is a magical anomaly that must be sealed away where none can abuse it, if not outright destroyed!

Nefirian smiled. "*My Fatis Mirajin* is already in safe hands. *She* is capable of protecting herself from anyone who might dare to approach her, and soon, no one will have to fear her influence."

The Chapter and the Beast-god exchanged a silent glance.

"...I have failed you beyond my wildest horrors, my pupil. I will not let you nurture a second Elysia. If I must coax the location from your corpse..."

At once, the muddy ground erupted. A pair of massive arms reached from the soggy grass, pulling tiny stones, dead plants and all manner of earthly debris with them as they pulled a great mound up and to the surface.
The mud golem towered over them, its single stone eye glowering down as its slick body dripped rainwater; the ground at its poorly-defined feet bubbled and churned like thick liquid.

Nefirian sat Didier down. "Get to Lyric. *Now!*"

Scrambling to his feet, the blue-haired *Aeneski* was all too happy to oblige, rushing around the perimeter to help the weakened dragon out of his bindings.

"So we've come full circle," the Chapter murmured under his breath, bowing his head and closing his eyes.
His feet sank into the mud; a moment later, he felt the beast lurching towards him.
He was calm; his mind was clear.

With his mind's eye, he could see it surging in to crush him.

"Didier," Lyric'ai gasped as the elf rushed to his side.

"Hmm?"

"*...who are you, exactly?*" The Boralion Prince hoped he wouldn't come to regret asking the question a second time.

"That's a funny question coming from you, don't you think?," Didier replied wryly."It's taking every bone in my body not to sing 'I know something you don't know', but that'd hardly be appropriate right now. Come on, let's get you out of these," he said, slipping a knife from beneath his suit jacket.

Nefirian leapt over the charging golem's head, skidding down its spine to land behind it; immediately, the mud began to suck at his shoes again, threatening to pull him underneath as the massive elemental began to turn around.

Gritting his teeth, he yanked his feet from his shoes and broke into a run.
Dilndrou's command of earth and water was second to none; seperate, they were dangerous enough-- but together as mud, the struggle was soon to become virtually futile.

The *Ain'och Modhan* -- the *Mudwalkers*, his former tribe-- were the servants and Speakers of the alligator-god. Their survival meant learning to harness as well as resist the elements of the marshes and swamps, and failure could only end in a slow and smothering death.

With the pulsing, living mud beneath his bare feet, he could just sense the coming undulations, both from Dilndrou's direct command as well as from the steps of his towering but sluggish construct.
Standing still was suicide; the sludge was quick to grab hold of him and try to pull him under, leaving him with no choice but to dodge the beast for as long as he could until Lyric was free.
His mind's eye gave him a far more precise view than his external ones ever could; its massive, slimy fist plowed into the mud where he had been just a moment before.
The force of the impact splashed goo onto his back, and he felt it instantly come to life, groping up towards his neck. The Chapter ran for the trees, grasping hold of a branch long enough to sling the creeping mud from his shoulders.

Dilndrou smirked; it was the opening he had needed. The tree released its roots, toppling onto its side and pinning Nef underneath.

Pausing for a second to catch his breath, he squirmed out from beneath the fallen tree and broke into a run again, his energy fading fast.
Dilndrou was toying with him, he knew; so far from the Mirajin, he was limited to his own strength. The crystal could hear him, but nothing more, and what energy he posessed was currently dedicated to moving as swiftly as he could over the unstable earth.

The mud golem's massive hand pinned him to the ground with incredible force; mud flowed into his mouth when he opened it to scream, and he gagged.

As the creature lifted him into the air, he sucked in a breath, his hair plastered to his face.
He figured it would hand him over to his former master now, and he would be magically forced to tell all--

-- and was caught completely off-guard when the golem instead slammed him into the earth a second, and then third time.

"*Fuck!* Lyric, try harder! We have to get him away from that thing!" Didier screamed.

"I'm *doing the best I can!*"

Dilndrou watched joylessly, allowing the ground to solidify again as the elemental continued its assault.
He disliked taking such violent measures, but it was more than apparent that his former Speaker would resist him for as long as possible.
He must be broken, first-- then, perhaps, he would relent and cooperate. Fae were stubborn, proud creatures, and the Aeneski most of all.

One life would hardly be sufficient to avenge the loss of his people, but better that a single person die to save the millions that would suffer otherwise...

With a soft sigh, the Beast-god regretted that he had not possessed such wisdom thousands of years ago.

"Alright, Dillygator-- you've had your fun, but I'm afraid I can't let you kill one of my little gods!"

Suddenly, the mud golem bubbled, hissed-- and exploded, sending its victim flying across the clearing and crashing into the grass near Lyric and Didier.

In its place hovered Nigel, his yellow eyes glowing in the fading light.

Now, Dilndrou did not hide his rage. "YOU!! I should have known from the start that you were behind this! Looking to reclaim the world for your mistress?"

Quickly, Didier rushed over to retrieve the battered Nefirian as Lyric'ai wriggled out of the last of the vines behind him.
"I swear to you," he gasped, "that this is the *last time* I shall ever be laid low like this..."

"Of course. Now, shh, don't talk. You're bleeding," Didier urged him.

"*Mistress?* Don't be silly-- she's my *mother*, actually," Nigel said, raising an eyebrow. "Either way, we don't want the world. We just want it to *function again*, and figured we'd help things fall into place. Your little moppet here made the Fatis Mirajin all by himself... we thought we'd make sure something came of it beyond the mess the Eye was."

Dilndrou leered. "And who are you, or Chira, to say whether it "functions" or not? This world belongs to the mortals now, not us, or long-dead dragons and their slave-gods! This crystal is an *abomination!*"

"Valenth will *rot* unless true magic, and true gods, return to the world," Nigel announced grimly. "The crystal is the key, and from there, the Chapters and their ilk will keep it from stagnating through their own struggle!"

"It wasn't Vagary that should have been banished. It was *you!* You and Voghn were the first to manipulate the Fae into doing Chira's bidding, and it was you who broke the pact, working behind our backs to ensure Chira would survive to reclaim power later!
After thousands of years, you're still the same treacherous bastard," Dilndrou seethed, "and I'll be *damned* if I allow you to corrupt this planet for your own selfish gain, Artemio!"

Nigel's demonic form wavered and expanded, his great wings spreading so as to blot out the setting sun. He screeched in rage, his voice hollow and unholy as he lunged at Dilndrou, now an enormous bat.

"DO NOT EVER CALL ME THAT!"

With a whisper, Dilndrou dispelled his own humanoid guise, rearing up on his thick hind legs to grapple with Nigel.

"I hardly understand what's going on, but it's time to get out of here!" Snatching up his father and friend, Lyric'ai carefully took them into his mouth before tunneling away into the soft mud as the Beast-gods battled above.

Book V Chapter 1: Leaving On An Airship

The Graceful Dancer
Lapsgrande Aeroport
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Clad in his Doc's regalia, Gabriel stared up at the massive airship in slack-jawed wonder. Shaped like a swan with wings spread, the ship had to have been at least fifty feet long. He'd never seen anything like it in his life.

"There she is, the Graceful Dancer in all her glory. It doesn't get any better than this, you know," a nearby mechanic announced as she strode out to greet him. "I envy you, a bit. That thing is loaded to the gills-- if it wasn't for the huge crystals we power 'em with, I'd wonder how they flew, myself. Glorious stuff, that mirajin."

"Yeah," Gabe laughed, fidgeting nervously. "Hey, do you know when everyone else is coming? I--"

"Hello again, Doctor Gaunthier. Glad to see you in good health."
Leonardo's voice buzzed from the speaker attached to his throat, his green eyes seeming to sparkle with mirth as Gabriel spun on his heel in shock. "And quick of reflex, as well. Even better; chances are it'll come in handy."

"*Leonardo*, don't frighten him." A silver-haired Aeneski in coveralls strode up behind the automaton, followed closely by Sagarthay Felld and a crew lugging various parcels.
Giving Gabriel a careful once-over, the elf clicked his tongue, grinned, and extended a large, calloused hand. "What's up, Doc?"

"...I--*what?* Um, *hi,*" Gabe managed, his face flushed.

"Welcome to Chimre. I'm Na'than Silvermane-- I built Leo over there," he explained cheerfully. "I'll be leading the expedition along with Sagarthay Felld, who I understand you're already acquainted with."

"...*Na'than Silvermane!*" Gabriel started at once. "Do you know anything about an Ev--"

"Sh-h-*hhhhhhhh,*" the elf urged him smoothly, giving the Bio Doc a firm pat on the shoulder before slipping past him. "Careful with that tongue of yours. This is Org territory, but the same rules still apply. We'll talk later, okay?"

Turning his head to glance behind him, Na'th winked before striding up the ramp and into the ship, leaving Gabriel in silent anxiety.

"Come along, Doctor Gaunthier. I'll catch you up on what's going to happen once we touch down in Aensdoun," Felld said softly, making a come-hither gesture with his tail as he marched past.

"Yes, Si--... do I call you "Sir"?" he asked, hurrying to the leupak's side.

As everyone made their way onto the ship, Leonardo stood where he was, watching carefully.

Involuntary psychic activity detected.

Analyzing source.

...

...

Psychic beacon identified.

Initializing examination program.

Examination program initialized.

...

Awaiting further instruction.

Book V Chapter 2: First Class to Aensdoun

The Graceful Dancer
Chimre Airspace

Violet skies and streaky orange clouds painted a fairytale panorama outside the windows of the Graceful Dancer as it soared over the Chimri Wilds, sunlight setting the crystallized forests aflame with dazzling color far below.

The grand cabin was the largest room on the zeppelin-- ovoid and furnished to resemble some noble's well-decorated lounge, covered in plush carpeting, patterned wallpapers and rich burgundy curtains.

The entirety of the expedition team now stood within, listening intently as Na'than Silvermane paced slowly before them.
Several snow-white lapsworgn lay nearby, watching the proceedings with vague disinterest as their handlers stroked their heads.

"Welcome aboard, everyone. As I certainly hope you know by now, this is a research flight is en route to Aensdoun. Anyone who was hoping to stop by Jetersborough for some R&R;, you're on the *wrong airship*. Sorry," Na'than began with a wry grin.

"We are here for two reasons. One, to explore Aensdoun and turn up more information about our planet's former inhabitants, the Elysians, and anyone who might have existed alongside them. That is our primary directive. We will not be alone, however-- the Court is likely to be in the area as well. Don't exchange information with them, don't harass them, *don't get in their way*. Leave it to your superiors to make contact if necessary. As for the second reason..."
Na'than adjusted his glasses. "What you are about to learn is confidential information of the highest degree. As members of the Rose Organization, you are expected not to share what you learn with us with anyone outside of your class and rank at any time. We understand that everyone makes exceptions for a friend or family at some point during their career.
"However... in this case, breaching your confidentiality agreement *is punishable by social death*."

Gabriel swallowed nervously.

"Now that you have fair warning..." Na'than smiled. "Our *second* directive is to seek out the ruins of the *Aen'och Trior*-- that is, the Chapters' ancient tribal grounds and the birthplace of the Fatis Mirajin. We have reason to believe that there may be artifacts belonging to the Dreamwaker that can be salvaged. In addition, the area is considered cursed even today, and unnatural creatures and phenomena abound.
"We will be assigning special temporary dreamshards for exploration in that area. Even so, you may not be able to remain there for any great length of time. We expect that to be the case, and so you will be assigned to one of several rotating teams to ensure the least exposure possible.
"Aensdoun is the most pristine continent on Valenth-- and by far, the most dangerous. There will be hostile natives. There will be hungry beasts that will see you as a free meal ticket. There will be exotic insects that may give you equally exotic diseases or bites and stings so nasty your insides turn into soup. As co-head of this expedition, it is my job to make sure you don't die.
"In order to do my job, you need to *not be an idiot*. That means a few simple things. Number one, from the moment we touch down to the moment we take off to head home, you are under my command. You will do as I say, as soon as I give you an order. You will stay with your designated group. You will *not* touch any native wildlife unless you are instructed to do so. You will *not* provoke the natives."

Narrowing his eyes and folding his arms behind his back, Na'than gazed carefully over the group.

"And above all else. You will never. *Ever*. Come into my quarters at night. That would be the single biggest mistake of your life," he said softly, a hint of fear in his eyes as several people exchanged nervous glances.
"That concludes your briefing. If anyone has any questions, I will be available during *daytime hours only*. Thank you, and I look forward to

working with you all."

As the group slowly dispersed, Gabriel caught Na'than's gaze. Offering a friendly smile, the *Aeneski* gently placed a hand on Gabe's shoulder. "You look tense. Why don't you come back to the bar with me and have a round? Doc Gaunthier, right? The Master's told me *so much* about you."

Wide-eyed, Gabe nodded quickly, his tongue caught in his throat. Somehow, that didn't ease his nerves much.

Book V Chapter 3: Minor Delays

The Graceful Dancer
Unknown Area, Aensdoun

The zeppelin landed with a great lurch that shook everyone inside, sending researchers stumbling and reaching for walls, furniture, and colleagues to keep steady with.
As the engines powered down and the doors were opened, people scurried to and fro to check the safety of the landing area, gather equipment, count heads and rouse sleeping crew.
Excited by the proceedings, several lapsworgn bounced at their handlers' heels, eager to get outside and see what all the fuss was about.

"All expedition members, please remain onboard until you are cleared to exit the zeppelin. I repeat, all expedition members, please remain onboard until you are cleared to exit the zeppelin," a loudspeaker attached to the walls droned.
Seated in a lounge chair by a window, Gabe fidgeted as he looked outside.
He wasn't certain what he expected Aensdoun to look like, but the brushland they seemed to have parked in was slightly disappointing-- not the beautiful, rolling green valleys and forests with distant mountains he was hoping for, at least not *here*.

As he gazed outward, he took note of small creatures moving throughout the landscape. In one of the few nearby trees, a furry creature clung to a branch, seeming to stare back at him. Farther below, tiny, colorful reptiles scurried through the brush, chasing after insects and other morsels they could get their teeth into.

Gabe suddenly resented being held in the cabin, even if only for a few minutes before they could venture outside. As far as anyone knew, no one had had a chance to catalogue the wildlife of Aensdoun because of its hostile inhabitants.
Perhaps he would have the honor of bringing to light hundreds of new species the developed world had never seen-- and even if not, he had the rare opportunity to see the mysterious continent firsthand.

Without warning, a loud *thud* shook the zeppelin, causing it to lurch onto its side for a moment; the cabin erupted in shrieks and horrified gasps.

"Dreamwaker's mercy, *what was that?!*"

"The entire *zeppelin* just tilted!"

"What sort of beast could have done such a--"

"Everyone quiet down!"

To everyone's surprise, it was the typically soft-spoken Felld whose voice rose above the chaos. In the background, ferocious snarls and shrieks were accentuated with the sharp report of gunfire.

"Much better, thank you. Our people are clearing the perimeter of all dangerous creatures-- once they've finished," a man's scream cut into Felld's sentence, "we will make our way outside and find a place to set up camp."

Everyone exchanged fearful glances; Gabriel rose an eyebrow. "What are you going to do with the corpse?"

"You may study and dissect it once the creature is dispatched, of course. Without a doubt, there shall be many more live ones to observe," Felld smiled.

Chewing upon his lip, Gabriel was torn between fear for his life and overwhelming excitement for the research to come. Despite himself, he managed a confident smile in return.

Outside of the zeppelin, the mysterious beast bellowed in pain before crashing into the dirt, its fall shaking the earth beneath it.

Book V Chapter 4: Moonshadow

Schalle's Heart Park
Lassenbhurg, Schalle

"Your plans will not succeed, no matter what lengths you go to to realize them. We will pursue you every step of the way-- and your corruption cannot hope to win against the might and fury of nature!" Dilndrou bellowed, his eyes glinting blue in the murky light as the skies opened up once more, rain swiftly converting the ground into a shallow lake.
Lifting his massive head, he opened his jaw, hissing as he charged at the bat hovering just above him.

Despite the pounding rain, the beast had little trouble maneuvering out of the way, swiping at the alligator's head as he ran past, whipping around to face his opponent again.

Neither of the great beast-gods were made for such combat; the water was not deep enough, the mud only surface-thick; Dilndrou was unable to slip away into the muck that would give him an advantage-- and the demon-bat could easily take to the air to evade his attacks nonetheless.

"You were always so full of hot air," Nigel scoffed with a grin, his teeth glinting in the flashes of lightning overhead. "What do you mean by "we", by the way? You and whom?Sasha? *Aqk?* Sasha is too busy lazing about in his silly glade... I know that all too well. And *Aqk..."*

"Aqk undoubtedly has been scouring Valenth for you. She is your greatest opponent-- let both of us find you at once, and you shall meet your end once and f--"

"Hah! *Wrong*, my silly lizard companion... Aqk *met her end* a few months ago. And you won't *believe* who managed it! If only I could take credit for it..."

Dilndrou's rage flared; he struggled not to lunge at the bat a second time, desperate to keep his anger in check. "You LIE! I have had enough of your drivel; why should I believe such foolish--"

"Aqk's Speaker has a child as well, you know-- another Elysian-spawn," Nigel began, fluttering about lightly in the storm's howling winds. "Great, golden fellow. Terribly hotheaded; if I'm to understand it correctly, he took out both his father and Aqk himself in a mirajin-addled rage. How about that family drama, eh?"

Nigel dropped to the wet earth like a stone, evading Dilndrou's sudden powerful lunge into the air; the enormous alligator's scale-plated belly sped a hair's breadth over Nigel's head, narrowly missing him.

"Oh, that was a *nice jump!* I'm impressed!" he crowed, spreading a wing with a flourish. "Why don't--*gurk!"*

The mud caked into Nigel's fur suddenly hardened into a thick shell, threatening to crush him where he sat; his feet sank into the sucking mud just beneath the shallow pools of rainwater.

"Hah, that was absentminded of me. Come now, Dilndrou. Don't take it out on me-- I didn't *touch her!* I only watched," he insisted sheepishly as the alligator strode closer, jaws open wide. The mud oozed its way up his body, reaching to smother him as he struggled to free himself.

"Even if you didn't, I still owe you for thousands of years of treachery, Artemio. Even if the filth that falls out of your mouth were somehow true, it wouldn't change the necessity of your death."

"Do you think killing me would bring an end to death?" Nigel asked, shaking the creeping mud from his face. "Do you think vengeance is a tool for change, Dilndrou?"

"I believe a problem must be destroyed at the source before a cure will be successful," he bellowed.

Nigel tilted his head, strangely calm despite his situation. "That," he announced, "is a wise observation, indeed. Oh, Dilndrou-- you are truly king among sages!" he cried, no small amount of mockery in his tone.

Dilndrou lunged a third time, intent on snapping the bat's horned head from his shoulders-- but something crashed into his side, throwing him just out of reach as it carved into the spaces between his thick scales. The alligator roared, rolling through the muddy water.

"What manner of trickery is-- ?!"

He was answered by a cacophony of barking howls and snarls as a swarm of dark, bounding shapes surrounded him. They leapt upon his scaly back, tearing and biting at him, many creatures acting as a single, powerful force.
Furious and disoriented, he rolled a second time, managing to tear one of the creatures from him with his mighty jaws, snapping it in two with a single bite before swallowing the corpse; this grisly retaliation only seemed to increase the little beasts' fury, however.

In the flashing lightning, a countless number of tiny eyes glittered golden.

"Worthless faerie-dogs!" Dilndrou cried, smashing three of the varworgn with a swing of his muscular tail, throwing several others back with the force of the muddy wave it made in its wake.

Still, the pack latched onto his body again, spattering the viscous ground with his blood even as it came to life to retaliate, forming tentacles and talons to batter and throw them with.

Without warning, the alpha surfaced, hurling himself atop Dilndrou's broad snout, his claws digging deep into the tough flesh. Dilndrou tossed his head up and back in an attempt to shake the werewolf off, even as he watched Nigel uproot himself from his mud prison, wings beating at the air.

"Don't spend too long playing with him, puppies," Nigel sang, taking flight again and circling overhead. "There's still much to be done elsewhere. I merely want him out of the way while we see to it!"

Immediately, Dilndrou knew what his adversary intended to do. Hurling himself into the mud, he tumbled through it, smashing as many wolves as he could beneath his bulk, blood oozing in great rivulets from between his scales.
Without the assistance of their late master, the wolves could injure him, but they were no grave threat.

Still, he could never retreat for Aensdoun in time to...

"Curse you a thousand times, Artemio! Sasha will paint the grove with your entrails!"

"I'm sure he would if I let him," the bat mused. "But it's not him I want. Death is curable, impermanent-- acts of vengeance are nothing but tantrums played out with weapons, and your cuddly teddy-friend killed poor Voghn out of self-defense. Why waste time punishing him for self-preservation? Only changing the world is worthwhile... why, your little Speaker feels the same way, doesn't he?"

With a sharp laugh, Nigel disappeared into the rolling clouds.

Dilndrou screamed in fury after him, the mud churning at his feet and lashing tail to keep his circling assailants at bay.

Death is curable...

Furious and aching, Dilndrou plowed into the thick trees surrounding the battered clearing, the *varworgn* pack snapping at his heels. Crashing through the wood, he hurled himself into the turbulent waters of a nearby lake, disappearing in a swirling cloud of silt and blood.

The pack came to a stop several yards away from the lake, eyeing the water warily; throwing themselves foolishly in would be a fatal error, as the alligator could now battle on his own terms.
Instead, they shook the mud from their fur, snapping and growling at their inferiors before turning tail and retracing their steps, their golden eyes glowing in the low light.

Book V Chapter 5: Good Old Anshe Hospitality

Bloodrain Vale, Aensdoun

The Silent Rose Expedition marched in a tight line through the wilds of Aensdoun, each member eyeing the thick trees and the spaces between them warily, straining their ears for any errant noise that might spill from the fanlike leaves, steeling their hearts for the inevitable great crash or bellow that would herald their doom.
The lapsworg mastiffs trotted along at their handlers' sides, snuffing at the soft earth, their furry white ears pricked straight up atop their heads as their tails swished.
Nearby, Gabriel hurriedly scrawled into a field journal, struggling to hold his hands steady and keep pace with his newfound friend.
The enormous reptile that their guards had slain just outside of the zeppelin was like nothing Gabe had seen in his entire life, and he hadn't had nearly enough time to examine it properly before it was time to pack up and ship out towards deeper parts of the area; it was all he could do to pour every word that was surging around inside his skull onto paper while they were fresh in his mind.

With creatures like *that* potentially lurking around every corner, he had no doubt that some massive and terrifying scavenger would have devoured the beast before they returned.
His heart ached a bit; they hadn't even had time to spare to pack it for later study.

Maybe he would luck out, and the skull would at least--

fwip!

A tiny gash opened up upon the bridge of Gabe's nose, stinging as blood beaded up from it.

He did the only logical thing he could think to do.

He threw his journal aside, threw his arms into the air, and shrieked in mortal terror.

Immediately, a huge hand clapped over his mouth, cutting his wail short as the entire expedition broke into a run, the woods around them suddenly exploding in the sound of warfare and rustling trees.
Neatly, Na'than scooped Gabriel off into his arms as he dashed past, clutching the wiry Doc tightly as his silver hair whipped like a banner behind his head.

Gabe's eyes bugged from behind Na'th's calloused hand. *"Gffffff oogh fff oooomphf!"*

"Don't worry, mate," Na'th assured him calmly as another pair of arrows flew between his ears and over his head. "It looks like it wasn't us they were shooting at. Look!"

As the expedition rushed out of the trees, two massive groups of *Aeneski* were converging around them and in the rolling hills up ahead. Clad in colorful cloths, animal skins and gleaming metal armor, the elves collided spectacularly, weapons clashing and arrows soaring over the great fray.

"Nnnghh! Nnnoooo oof *ffoofh!!*"

"...oh, I can probably stop doing that now," Na'th admitted, removing his hand. "Say again?"

"For the love of... *not* that way!!"

"I've got you!"

Turning on his heel, Na'than waved to the expedition with a muscular arm, directing the group to make a sharp left before continuing on his way, the rest of the explorers and their worgn close behind.
More *Aeneski* exploded from the trees, rushing down the hill to meet their tribesmen and opponents, some battling fiercely even as they ran, injured men and women alike tumbling head over heels through the red-streaked grasses.

"Such infighting! This can't possibly be the norm, can it? Amongst their *own* species?" Felld was incredulous; even the most ill-tempered feral leupaks were usually tolerant of their own kind.

"That's what they say," Na'th admitted loudly enough to be heard over the sounds of battle, now carrying Gabe slung over one shoulder.
"Seems like it wasn't too far from the mark at the moment, doesn't it? It's amazing they haven't driven one another extinct."

Breathless, the expedition crowded down a new forest path, dropping to the soft grass to rest. Na'than sat Gabriel down with an apologetic smile before making his way over to the wolves, hugging them fondly around the neck and letting them lap his face in return.

Gabe dampened his fingers with his tongue, rubbing the tiny trickle of blood clean from his nose as he made a mental note not to anger the chief engineer; he had been plucked from the ground and carried about as effortlessly as if he were a ragdoll.

Na'than leaned against a tree, doing a swift headcount as one of the wolves wriggled excitedly beside him, tail waving furiously.

"Alright, it looks like everyone is here-- Gabe, your journal," Na'th added, handing the flustered scientist the little book. "Keep your wits about you-- that was probably just a preview of our lovely little trip through the region. There are a large number of seperate *Aeneski* tribes throughout Aensdoun, and that's how they *all* like to greet one another.
"As long as they're busy impaling their peers, they shouldn't have any reason to do the same to us."

"Groaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargghgf!" came a thunderous bellow a few yards into the wood.
Gabriel pointedly inserted himself between Na'than, the wolves and a sturdy-looking tree without a single word.

"Never a dull moment," Na'than announced as everyone turned their heads.

A huge, gray-furred creature charged *through* the trees, tearing several small saplings from the dirt as it barrelled past, chasing after a pair of elves who had gone undetected just moments prior.
Pausing for a moment, the beast turned, grabbing one of the small trees before continuing its chase, smashing the sapling against each trunk it passed as it howled, thundering off into the distance.

"Flamekeeper take my soul with loving care, let me rest peacefully in the hereafter..." Gabe began, bowing his head sullenly.

Book V Chapter 6: The Hearts of Beasts

Abandoned Laboratory
The Chimri Wilds, Chimre

"Alright, then-- who's going to be the first to explain what's going on?"

Lyric'Ai leaned against one of the few remaining walls of the old abandoned laboratory, folding his arms across his chest and looking quietly indignant as his eyes passed between his father and friend.

The crystalline trees surrounding the ruined building swayed to and fro in the gentle breeze, tinkling softly like the whispers of far-off stars. The grass grew pale blue here, and spiny vines coiled through the soft earth and around tree trunks, punching through the concrete walls and crawling up again where they could take hold.
Watery orange sunlight filtered through the glassy canopies, illuminating the forest floor below where ordinary trees would have darkened them.

In the distance, eerie bellows and cries of strange fauna echoed over the hills and valleys; the trio paid the cacophony little mind.

"It's nearly time," Nefirian replied simply, collapsing to sit upon the dusty floor almost immediately, his usual cool, unflinchable demeanor falling away. "House Ranpa is breaking through the Mimorre Ridge as we speak. The deed will be done in a few weeks' time, and then--"

"That *isn't* what I meant." Lyric's voice was cold. "Why is--"

"... Didier here?" The indigo-haired *Aeneski* finished for him. "Because I happened to be with your father when the crystal informed him that you were in danger. May I explain further, milord?"

"If you're ready to." The sudden honorary did little to ease Lyric's anxiety.

Didier nodded slowly, meeting eyes with the Boralion prince. "First things first-- I am elf in appearance only..."

"So you've been *spying* on me, then?!" Lyric'Ai spat. "What good has it done you, exactly? What's the point? Did you think it'd bring me back to the Rose if you got someone close to me--"

"Lyri, *stop it*. Didier joined the Marionette of his own accord."

"Oh, *alright*. And you just *happened* to know him by chance, then? I don't understand why you can't just leave me to wander in peace. I don't... I don't care for the politics and the faction nonsense and the... the *wars*--"

"You think *we* like war, Lyric?" Didier snapped. "You think Grenadienne didn't break our hearts, too? There's a reason we've gone--"

The dragon cut him off immediately, his temper flaring. "Alright, *just who the fuck are you!?* I want a real answer. NOW!

"It's just as I said, Lyric'Ai. Grenadienne wasn't *your* tragedy alone," Didier began carefully. "I was one of the few surivors-- it was I who saw the beginning of the war, and came to inform you and... *our* father of what had happened."
The elf's eyes glazed with tears; in an instant, he had turned away, striding over the damaged steel floor and out into the soft grass.

Lyric rushed after him, grabbing his shoulder.

"... *Ander?* I didn't realize you were still... alive, after all these years. I'm... I'm *sorry."*

But Didier shook his head. "What do *you* have to apologize for? You did all you could do. Your hatchlings were no more in your control than the events that took place. *My* original children have been dead for at least a thousand years; I've picked up the pieces and moved on, I *had* to.
"I serve our father the only way I know how-- with music on good days, just as you do, and sometimes *alongside* you-- and on *other* days, I serve him with blood, my own as well as the blood of others." Didier sighed. "I've wanted to tell you for years, ever since you first accepted me into the Marionette. But that would be admitting I knew what you were, as well as dropping my own act and possibly endangering our mortal friends.
"I *admire* you, Lyri, and that you understand the meaning of peace -- that's no ruse."

"When the Marionette dies... if you want to continue the masquerade with me, Ander, I'd be happy to have you," Lyric said softly, glancing at his feet.

"We'll see-- I'd hate to burden you. But, Lyri?"

"Yes?"

"Call me Didier, alright? For safety's sake."

"Of course," Lyric murmured sheepishly.

The two of them stood in silence for a long while, watching the otherworldly life of the Wilds dance and sparkle in the lazy winds.
It had been a long trip from Liasse to Chimre, even through the Boralion tunnels deep beneath the ocean.
Though they were solid fliers, the mirajin dragons' true calling was to dig through the earth, clawing expansive passageways and caverns through the subterranean world they called home. Because of this, the violet beasts were rarely seen above ground-- and they seemed to prefer it that way, by far.
All the better to move undetected by overzealous Flarion. All the better to live away from the eyes of judgemental and troublesome surface folk.

And above all, all the better to be *forgotten*.

"Hail, dreamers," came a musical voice several paces away; the trio lifted their heads. Before them, a deep red leupak, built long and low like a great cat with a wild crest of vivid blue peacock's feathers strode forward, followed by three others, each of little comparison to its fellows save for their brilliant hues and toothy maws.

"Hail," Didier replied, bowing his head respectfully. "Are you out on the hunt today, sister?"

"Hunting for someone worthwhile to harass," she agreed with a wry grin. "The city-folk are all well afraid to come out of their gates, and the country-folk have all fled or been eaten or egged long before. There is no one to keep us company and amuse us now."

"Perhaps you should venture west, out of the crystal forests," Nef suggested with a mischevious look. "Everyone in Chimre knows to avoid you-- but if you move into Dreamsong for a while, you can catch someone there off guard, and convince people here that the way is safe again."

Lyric shot his father an accusatory glare as Didier covered his mouth to laugh discreetly.

"You know they'll call slayers after them faster than they can blink if they do that. Are you really so content to encourage a Feral to cause trouble in another country?"

But the Chapter simply shook his head.

"Leupaks aren't the same as natural creatures and humanoids, Lyri. You can put clothes on a monster and tell it to walk on two legs and live in a house, but it's no more a person than a human is a bird, is it? Leupaks need hosts for eggs, people to influence and a place to hide away from the lifestyle and morals of two-legged folk. People exploit other creatures-- and even others of their own species-- in ways that suit them.
"Is it fair to say a leupak cannot do the same? Would *you* feel comfortable pretending to be an elf if you weren't allowed to drop your disguise and dig in the earth, or work your music-magic, even though all of that is a natural part of what you are?"

"That may be," Lyric considered, "but where does it end, if so? Should every intelligent species have their own set of rules? Is it not murder if a chimaera kills a human for his property simply because their laws allow it? Should everyone merely roll over and accept their fates if a race of dragons appears and declares us all unfit to live?"

"That, my boy," Nefirian grinned, getting to his feet and brushing himself off, "is *precisely* the question."

Book V Chapter 7: The Emerald Wonderland

Silent Rose Expedition Camp
Heaven's Pillar Forest, Aensdoun

"We'll find those idols soon enough," Gabriel announced cheerfully as he scribbled into his journal. "At least in the meantime, we've documented hundreds of new species in just the few days since our arrival."

"The sooner we find them, the sooner we can move on, complete our mission and return home alive," Felld murmured. "Every moment we exist upon this accursed continent is a moment in which we are tempting fate. Thus far, we have been lucky not to have come across a situation we can't handle."

Na'than pouted. "Hey, hey, chin up. There's all sorts of nasty stuff out here, but you're well protected. The Thorne are nothing to sniff at, and, well... *I'm here, too*."
His last words were vaguely sulky, his ears flopping back against his head.

Despite himself, Gabe laughed before returning to his notes.
This camp was yet another temporary one, nestled snugly between two of the largest trees the group had ever seen, thick enough around that a chain of twenty people might not be enough to wrap around it, and so tall that the forest canopy seemed to disappear into the clouds.

"Heaven's Pillar, we'll call it," Gabe announced with an important air; no one had any better suggestion, and so the name stuck.

Na'than leaned against one of the huge trees, relaxing as he tossed one leg over the other and closed his eyes, one ear flicking as a passing insect buzzed at it-- mere moments before a piercing scream cut through the peace like a blade.
Everyone was on edge immediately.

"And what shall we call that?" Leo asked with the barest hint of robotic mirth.

Gabe frowned, setting his journal down to reach for his canteen of tea, taking a slow mouthful.

"Another tribe nearby, I bet. You know, no offense to all of you elves and whatnot, but are you guys sure you're not going to knife me at night because you got bored or I didn't like your tea?"

Na'than shot his automaton a sideways glance, then grinned at the human. "Well, I can guarantee that *I* won't *stab* you at night."

Gabriel didn't know what to make of that, and wasn't certain he wanted to ask.

A second scream cut their conversation short. Loud enough to buzz in everyone's ears and echo through the forest, it had an inhuman sound that caught Na'than's ears right away. Slowly, he rose to his feet, ears pricked.
"No one make a sound," he whispered, and the camp went silent.

The ground trembled beneath their feet in a steady rhythm, booming footsteps sounding in the distance in time, traveling closer with every thud.

Gabriel stood, carefully turning to glance in the direction of the sound; something was lurching towards them, flashing emerald in the light shining through the canopy.
Swallowing, he clenched his jaw and stood firm; he was getting used to life in Aensdoun, as little as he cared to admit it, and he knew it was

far better to keep his wits about him and trust the sentinels traveling with the group to act.
They were here to protect everyone, after all, and they had yet to fail in their...

Crashing through the trees with reckless abandon, the green thing had run close enough to give everyone a clear view of it.

It was a dinosaur... and by what Gabriel knew, it was a *carnivorous dinosaur*.
It paused, lowered its head, and screamed; everyone clapped their hands over their ears and winced.

Seemingly satisfied, the titanic beast broke into a full charge, mouth wide open to display its jagged teeth as it hurtled forward, each step a miniature earthquake.

"Alice!"

Just a few metres away, the green horror skidded to a stop, throwing up great clouds of dust and grass as its claws tore into the soft ground.
It rose its head, glancing around in confusion for a moment before shrieking again, short and clipped as though asking a question.

Atop its head, a stern-faced *aeneski* stood to gaze down upon the little camp, towering in his own right.
He frowned and disappeared from view, appearing once more upon the ground beside the dinosaur's foot, striding up for a closer look.

"...*Alice?*" Gabriel murmured quizzically.
The expedition stared at the newcomer and his reptilian companion in dumbfounded shock.

"What?" the mysterious elf quipped, tilting his head before breaking into a grin. "Haven't you ever seen a *dremish elf* before?"

Book V Chapter 8: Little Dream

The Clocktower Throne
The Cathedral of a Thousand Roses
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

The pen danced across the pages of his journal, leaving their mark in a language precious few still living could ever hope to read.
These were for his eyes only; like many of the greatest Rose secrets, their contents had no chance of trickling down through the ranks and out of the organization.

In the distance, breaking stone rumbled like thunder on the horizon. Slowly and surely, House Ranpa was slowly carving the Mimorre Ridge open. No force alive could possibly stop them from completing their task, and once they had finished...

Then, it would be his time to shine; his time to give Valenth the gift he had spent thousands of years cultivating under his wing.

He smiled softly, looking up from his desk to admire the crystal the room had been constructed around, and the great black dragon sleeping peacefully around its base, tiny multi-colored chicks blinking in and out of existence around her.

Beside himself, he threw back his head and laughed joyfully.

Despite it all; the wars, the lives regrettably lost, the misunderstandings and bitter clashes... This one final act would make every struggle worthwhile-- worthwhile, but obsolete forevermore. War would become meaningless, pain and death demoted into mere inconveniences. Even Kelan's endless crusade to preserve Valenth's life would no no longer be necessary; everything, *everyone* would be safe, and even the creatures lost in ages past could be found once more.

Valdren could be cured of his madness; perhaps even reintroduced as part of the family with his renegade dragons, their tempers put on ice.

Even Elliot'syounger brother... what might she think to see him restored? Perhaps he could change her mind at last.

Either way... no more needless bloodshed.
No more tragedy.
No more *limits*.

Soon, he would live up to his name.
Soon, his dream-- and everyone else's-- would become much more than some simple flight of fancy.

His smile stretched across his face like a gash, revealing sharp teeth.

Book V Chapter 9: Welcome to Chimre

Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Degregorius and Ciere danced lazily in the sky above, setting the city aglow with their radiance.
Hundreds of skyscrapers and graceful arches sculpted in white stone cradled the Laps skyline, seeming for all the world like great sentinels standing watch over its citizens as they went about their daily routines.

People strode through city streets and marketplaces, slipping in and out of office buildings, libraries and laboratories to see to their business, carrying baskets, pushing kiosks, driving or riding in gold-on-white carriages pulled by six-legged reptiles, their heads tipped high as they displayed their colorful scales.

Human, *aeneski*, *silisk* and *chimaera* lived, worked, and played here just as their cousins farther west in the cities of Dreamsong did.
But *stranger* creatures lived alongside them, some walking proudly through the streets in the open eye, others slinking through the few shadows to be had, closely watching the crowds as they mulled about-- sometimes blending with them, sometimes avoiding them.

In other places, they were tolerated at best-- or hunted, at worst.
But this was *their* home-- and the other, humanoid races were welcome by their will alone.

This city, and indeed *every* city in Chimre, belonged to the *leupaks*.

Walking slowly through the crowds, a graceful creature shielded her watery pink eyes from the sunlight with a slender hand, her silk gown rustling at her clawed feet.
Her eyes danced from focus to focus before finally settling upon something that held her interest; with a cold smile, she vanished into the sea of bodies to stalk her prey.

A lone lapsgrande trotted eagerly down a side-road, his flat tongue lulling from his mouth, pulled back into a happy canine grin mirrored by his long and wagging tail.
He had a collar-- black leather and decorated with several silver rings-- but no tags, and no owner or companion at his heels to guide him.

Discovering a row of fenced backyards, the creature eagerly galloped forward, carefully peering through each gate in turn, and finding several dogs of various breed, tied to posts or sleeping by their food dishes; one or two noticed him, barking excited greetings that roused the others.

Reaching up with hands more befitting a sentient creature, the white dog carefully unlocked each fence, his ears pricked up to detect any approaching owners.

As the dogs rushed out of their yards to accompany him, a strange, black tattoo flashed into view upon his forehead, just for an instant.

The little group howled to celebrate their freedom, and dogs throughout the city began to join in, one by one.

Near the heart of the great city, a lone figure stood vigil in a clocktower, his body a mesh of living metal and wood.
He heard the dogs' voices over the din of the city, and smiled faintly; he knew who was responsible at once.

With a lash of his thick tail, the bronze leupak turned his attention to the mountains just over the horizon, spreading like red wings behind the Cathedral of a Thousand Roses.
As he watched, tiny lines seemed to appear upon the mountain face, tracing geometrical shapes across its surface before crumbling away, piece by piece. Large figures wandered back and forth before the Ridge, climbing up and across it, positioning themselves carefully before slamming their horned heads into the solid rock.

Overhead, winged creatures circled like birds, overseeing and orchestrating the mountain leupaks' careful work.

The work was slow, but it had more than left its mark-- the Mimorre Ridge was disintegrating before his very eyes.
In a matter of weeks, the mountain would have become two; a natural gateway between Chimre and the ancient land that had been long ago forgotten by the outside world.

Over the mountain ridge, he could just make out a glimmer of soft light.

As he watched patiently, the thunderous rumble of falling rock reached his ears.
Within his chest, the golden pendulum swung in a steady rhythm as the hands of his facet's clock-face carefully ticked away the seconds.

Book V Chapter 10: Liam

The Infinite Green, Aensdoun

"I am Liam of Aensdoun, and this is my girl,Alice; I'm a dinosaur breeder and egg collector," the Dremish Aeneski announced proudly, reaching up to fondly stroke the leg of the green monster standing beside him.
It eyed the members of the expedition with dim curiosity, each breath sending a gust of warm and dank air flowing across the camp.

"A... *dinosaur breeder?* So you... how old is she? You raised her yourself, I presume," Gabe began, immediately flipping his journal open to take notes.

"About seven years or so-- I found her egg not too long after I arrived, myself, and decided to take my chances. Who'd ever guess that the natives are scared shitless of the greater theropods? It's what's kept me alive all these years. And, well, dripping with krus, if I might add, hah." He grinned.

Na'than tilted his head. "So in other words, you're a glorified exotics dealer. You must have quite the love-hate relationship with the chimaera; was it them that gave you those burn scars?"

"Chimaera? *Look at me*. Do I look like a chimaera'd be a threa--" Liam caught himself mid-sentence, and grinned. "Well, there are things out here that are far more dangerous than a Sorilian."

Na'th, Gabe and Felld exchanged glances.

"Anyway, enough about me, don't you think? I take it you lot are here to see the ruins, too; follow me." At once, the giant elf scrambled back atop his dinosaur, waving for the expedition to come along.

"So long as I'm nearby, the tribes won't come near us. Alice loves to chase them, since she knows they'll scream and scatter, and there's not a damn thing they can do to pierce her hide."

As the group gathered their supplies, Gabriel inched closer to the stranger and his mammoth companion. "Are there others?" He asked.

"Others like her? Oh, no-- she's the only one I have, and I'm not interested in giving others a bite, if you know what I mean. Keeps the chimaera dealers in line; as long as they think I might eventually breed up one of these babies for them, they don't dare try to pull a fast one on me yet. They'd slit my throat the moment they had all the information they needed to cut out the middleman, you know?" Liam narrowed his eyes.

"No, no, I-- I don't *want one*, as beautiful as she is," Gabe gushed nervously as the zemoira tilted her head to eye him. "I mean, other large theropod species. I'm pretty sure we had a run-in with a zemoira--er, one of her-- on the way in."

"Ohhhhhh. *Oh, yeah*, you better believe it. These are the largest dinosaurs on the continent, at least that I've found. Then you have the long, low ones with huge blocky heads and spiny backs, and bulky, dark ones with spiky horns, kinda like... antlers, I guess, but snaky heads. Mind you, they're still pretty big, but not as. "

"You keep your eyes out after I'm gone, and you'll probably see 'em. Aensdoun is a wild continent--like I'm sure you guys know already, there are old abandoned cities all over the place, but no one other than the crazy elves have lived here that I've seen."

Gabe did his best to hide his mounting excitement. He couldn't believe he was actually in Aensdoun, still alive-- or his sudden change of luck, either. Perhaps he'd live to see his home again after all, and have tales to tell, to boot!

"Everyone's ready to go, Liam. Lead the way," Na'than urged gently.

The expedition was on the move again, now with an enormous green guide. Liam invited Na'than up atop Alice's back to speak to him as everyone made their way through the woods and over the lush green fields.
They noted that everything had gone silent around them; no creatures, elf or beast, dared to show their faces with the zemoira around, stomping great craters into the soft earth with its heavy feet.

"Always admired you lot, you know, the Rose and the Court alike," Liam admitted with a boisterous laugh. "Traveling the world, looking for interesting things to find and collect and mess with. Yeah, if not for that whole... *rules* thing, I'd almost go for that kinda life."

"So they're here as well?"Na'th asked.

"Sure are-- I actually showed them to the ruins not long before you all turned up. At first, I thought I might have to fight a losing battle for my eggs, but once they told me they were just here to do studies for... I don't know, some E-word they used, but it wasn't Erosion.
But I'm good for studies, as long as they leave my wilds intact, and don't start sending tourists over. That's more something the chimaera would do if they could get away with it, anyway." The big man grinned.

Na'than laid his ears back flat, pursing his lips.
He was hoping the other faction wasn't already on the trail, but here it was; they'd likely already had a head start on them.
Hours were certainly better than days, however-- perhaps there were still artifacts to collect, or idols to claim for study.

Then again, with how the Court got with information...

"Did they tell you anything about the area or their plans before you left?"

"Aw, no," Liam admitted. "I did most of the talking, really-- the lady didn't even give me her name."

Typical Court tight-lippedness; Na'than sighed. "How many of these cities have you seen?"

"Personally? Seven or eight, all over the continent. Once you see the big stone dragons, you know one's nearby. Most of them are intact, too-- other than when dinosaurs or other big critters manage to knock them down, the *Aeneski* won't go near 'em, for fear of getting cursed. But oi-- you can see for yourself, there!"

Liam pointed across the rolling hills-- in the distance, a ring of stone dragon idols stood in various states of weather and disrepair, their heads lifted towards the sky and wings spread at half-mast. Farther ahead, a crumbling stone ring seemed to mark the gates of an ancient city-- and behind them, small figures flitted back and forth, some on two legs and others winged.

Na'than rose his voice.
"We're coming in on a city, everyone. The Court *is* here; do *not* speak to anyone outside of the expedition and Liam here unless you are given explicit authorization. Felld, send several of your crew to study those idols; my captains will take Thornes and Silvermane guards with them.
"Everyone else, forward, and keep your eyes peeled for stray artifacts!"

Liam watched with fascination as the expedition around him suddenly divided itself into neat groups, white wolves and spiked leupaks standing side by side with researchers and archaeologists, some sprinting off into the distance to reach the dragon idols while others continued ahead, talking excitedly with one another or looking on with determination or anxiety.

The Court saw the newcomers approaching and immediately began to disperse throughout the site, scouring the walls and grounds in double time.

Na'than slid down from atop the dinosaur's back, neatly landing on his feet and striding with full confidence into their midst without missing a beat. Nearby, a pair of Erosion dragons eyed the Rose expedition with silent suspicion.

The ruined city was a magnificent sight; ancient, weather-worn and cracked stone was carved and stacked into graceful arches and pathways as far as the eye could see.
Ornate floor tiles stuck up from overgrown grass and caked mud, mixed in with the bones of creatures old and new alike.
There were surprisingly few buildings of any kind; everything seemed open-air, with wide-open flat areas, tall stages that overlooked former meeting places, and garden walks long overtaken by wild vines and strangling roots.
Just behind the once-great city, a grove of enormous Anshe trees swayed their many branches in the soft winds, glittering green and golden under the twin suns.

As everyone gazed over the lost paradise, the Court combed through the area, scooping up even the tiniest bits of rubble that could possibly have meaning, all while gazing at the Rose members standing at the gates as though daring them to disrupt their operation.

Felld pursed his lips, watching as Na'than made his way through the ruins, speaking to several Courtesans as they led him farther back.
"They'll not give up an inch of this place. They'll expect *us* to share our findings with them, though," the leupak laughed without mirth.

"Is this typical?" Gabriel asked, astonished.

Felld smirked. "Always, always. The Court are as hungry for information as we are-- they collect and catalogue it, and eventually they might feel inclined to share tiny bites, yes. But they lust after the knowledge of all civilizations, past and present-- all the better to rule with. It's fascinating how they find a way to worm into every throne room the world over, don't you think?"

But Gabe frowned. The Court was an order of mentors and advisors; they were responsible for guiding every country away from decisions that might result in conflict and war. Was that not a noble enough cause-- and if they were a bit stingy about historical discoveries, wasn't it a fair enough price?

"They serve a purpose just like we do, I think," he admitted cautiously.

But Felld snorted. "You'll learn soon enough."

His eyes fell to the ground; with a sharp gasp, the leupak swiftly snatched up a small trinket, slipping it away into a pouch slung around his shoulder without a moment's hesitation.
The researchers nearby watched him, then immediately began to comb the perimeter for anything worth retrieving for study.

Meanwhile, Liam's eyes were upon the trees behind the city; his stern eyes grew wide as a flash of brilliant, iridescent red shone through the leaves.

"...if you'll excuse me, I need to get back to camp and check on the hatchlings. Lovely meeting you lot-- good luck!"

Without another word, the Dremish elf kicked his heels into Alice's back; she screamed a sharp farewell before turning tail and charging away across the rolling hills.

Gabriel and Felld watched him go for a moment before turning to squint behind the city ruins.
A gasp fell from Felld's mouth.

"... Dreamwaker's girth. Gaunthier, did you see that?"

"I saw something, but I don't--" he began.

"No, *there*. Look! Was that a dragon?!"

Book V Chapter 11: Coil

Heaven's Pillar Ruins
Pillar Forest, Aensdoun

Na'than walked silently through the ruined city, following the lead of the two Courtesans before him. The nervous twitch of his left ear was the only outward sign of his unease; this was hardly the sort of situation he excelled at.

After his freedom had been bought from his former Master, he had been given two responsibilities-- to his *new* Master, and more recently, to his pack. He was an expert of the technical, capable of working miracles with machines, given the time and the materials.

But dealing with outsiders was not his calling, especially not those as scrutinizing and manipulative as the Court. Never in his life had he more desperately wished his Master were here.

"Greetings... Mr. Silvermane? You're the fellow responsible for the party at the gates, correct?"

The creature's silky voice was like a splash of cold water; despite himself, Na'than did a double-take, eyes wide with shock.

It was unlike anything he had ever seen or read of before; humanoid from neck to waist and serpentine from the waist down, its long tail coiled around itself as well as the crumbling throne it sat upon.
Its head was that of a great, hooded snake, scales catching and throwing the light in a multitude of dazzling colors. Beaded and feathered jewelry and hides were draped around its form, adding a perhaps unnecessary layer of additional color.
The thing gazed down at him, split tongue parting its pitted lips as it waited for a reply. Catching himself, Na'th recovered quickly.

"I... I am, apologies. You are...?"

"Leader of our expedition. As you can see, this site is unfortunately already occupied. I mean you no disrespect, but I'd greatly appreciate the relocation of your group."

Of course.
This was the head Courtesan, after all-- it was more than likely that every Erosion on the planet knew his face and name. The creatures had a way with caching knowledge and sharing it with their own kind; the thought made him mildly queasy.
Did they have any idea what was unfolding in Chimre? And if they did...

His expression cordial, Na'than cleared his throat and smiled.

"Ah, I understand. Forgive me my trespass, milady." Lying his ears back flat, he bowed stiffly before turning upon his heel and heading for the city gates to return to the expedition waiting outside.

The naga-shaped Courtesan watched him go with slitted eyes; she regarded the two standing before her without moving her head.

"Follow them," she murmured.

Felld and Gabriel stood by the gates as Na'than made his way back out of the crumbling city; he glanced apologetically at Felld, whose expression was sour.

"We can't stay here."

"Oh?" Felld sniffed. "And *who's* surprised?"

Book V Chapter 12: First Exposure

Heaven's Pillar Forest, Aensdoun

The expedition was on the move again, and Gabriel was tiring of the constant travel; nothing sounded better than having a few days to relax and tend to himself, regardless of *where* that might take place. The soles of his feet ached so thoroughly that he wondered if they might fall off.

Why did Aensdoun have to be such an enormous place?

Nearby, Na'than and his automaton carried on in relative silence, the elf's burly arms folded across his chest as he walked, his blue eyes darting from tree to tree as they traveled the dirt paths.

Abruptly, Gabe stopped in his tracks.

"This forest is silent," he murmured, frowning; Na'than perked his ears and wrinkled his nose as the party paused to glance around. A gentle breeze shook the boughs of the trees above, but no other sound was heard save the rustling of the leaves.

"These trees aren't quite right, either. They're the same species that we've been seeing the whole way through, but... the bark is..."

The Bio Doc ran his fingertips gently over one of the titanic trees; the smooth, glassy bark sloughed away at his touch, crystalline flakes floating slowly down to the ground as they sparkled in the low light. "Something's mutated them. I don't know--"

"*I* do," Na'than interrupted, reaching to grab Gabe's shoulder as he started down the path once more, waving a hand to urge the rest of the expedition to follow with haste.

"Should I--er, may I ask?"

Na'than nodded, chewing his lip. "The Mirajin has affected this area. These trees are old, and I can smell it in them-- don't ask about *that*," he added quickly. "We're coming up on the Trior grounds now, which means the modern tribes won't be lurking these areas... but we don't know what *is*."
The *Aeneski* rose his voice for all to hear.
"If for any reason some of you *aren't* already wearing your dreamshards, I suggest you get them on five minutes ago.
We're coming into a high-Mirajin area, and we won't know exactly how much radiation is still here until we're in the middle of it. If you fail to follow orders and begin to mutate, you *will* be executed immediately. Don't make me do that to any of you, please-- you wouldn't be *half* as disappointed as me."
As an aside, he glanced to Leo. "Mirometer area detection on, please, Leonardo."

"Scanning area; please stand by." The automaton's eyes flashed and he began to hum softly; Gabe watched him with mild curiosity. "17mi, steady," Leo announced after a few moments of humming.

"*Son of a*--" Gabe swore, spinning on his heel to stare at Na'than.
"Strike that," the silver-haired elf announced. "Everyone stop and set up camp here; no one takes *another step* in until you've recieved your S-grade shards and your group assignments."

The Bio Doc swallowed, sitting on a patch of bluish grass and resting his chin on his knees as Na'than instructed the group.

17mi -- *miros*, the standard measurement of biologically-absorbable mirajin energy-- was two points *above* the maximum safe exposure level. Chances were no one would become ill here if they were wearing a shard, but even standard-issue SRO dreamshards were only made to absorb 15 miros a day.
If there was still this much residual mirajin energy just within the boundaries of an area that had been untouched for centuries...

Shaking his head, the young scientist hurriedly began to scrawl in his field journal as his peers set up tents and equipment, sorting into teams and discussing their assigned missions among themselves as they played with their unfamilar new dreamshards.

Na'than set one of the crystals between the pages of Gabe's journal."So, tell me some more about this place," he asked, glancing up.

"If the Mirajin was really made here, how do we know we're not going to be marching to our deaths? Laps itself only has a background level of seven miros if you walk up to the gates of the Cathedral, right?"

"It was only so powerful when it was first made, you know," Na'th murmured, scratching his head. "*Tiny, too*, by comparison-- the Master told me he could hold it in the palm of his hand at first, and even setting it atop his animals' cages was completely harmless. It started to affect more of the area over time, and as it and its power grew, it became more dangerous for creatures to come into contact with it.
"He doesn't know why it never affected all of Aensdoun, but it was roughly as tall as a man when he left, and everything in the village grounds and the surrounding areas had been affected by it. Not killed, but definitely *changed*."

"Okay. So we're definitely not going to die, but we might all turn into writhing balls of clammy tentacles. Got it." Gabe frowned.

Na'than shrugged lightly. "Eh, it happens. Try not to stress too much about it, alright? Everyone will have to cycle in and out of the grounds to ensure their shards have a break from all of the exposure, but if everything's done properly, we shouldn't have any casualties.
"And hey, after this? Digging around for Elysian artifacts aught to be a cakewalk."

Gabe idly wondered how the elf could stay so cheerful in the face of painful mutation. Perhaps it was a family thing.

As the last group members were assigned, the human was unsurprised to discover he would be in Na'than's group. Grinning, he playfully nudged his new friend in the side. "You're not gonna ask your Master if he'll adopt me too, are you?"

"Why would I do that?" Na'th asked genuinely. "He's already got plans for you."

"He-- *what?!"*

Na'than finally returned the smile as Gabe's gave way to confusion.

"I'm only *kidding,* don't look at me like that. Poor thing, you're so tense!"

As the expedition groups went their seperate ways, Na'than's party continued on down the dirt path leading deeper into the forest. As they traveled, eerie birdsong and the rustling of brittle leaves played through their ears.

"And of course, now that we have sound again, I can't pick out a single species," Gabe murmured.

"How much do you want to bet that whatever's living in this area has evolved from whatever was around when the Dreamwaker was here?"

"Why bother with a bet? We're deep in Mirajin country now, no question about it. I--"

Something brittle crunched beneath Na'than's foot; he paused, lifting it slowly to reveal a leupak's skull.

"Well!" Na'th exclaimed. "There you have it. Welcome to the Aen'och Triorlands, Gabe."

Giving the scientist a hearty slap on the back, Na'than continued on his way as Gabriel hurriedly gathered the shattered skull fragments, sweeping them into his bag before following suit.
All around them, the trees seemed to take on an iridescent sheen; in the low light of early evening, the crystalline leaves and branches threw a spectrum of colors through the air.

The group set to work at once, swiftly examining the area, digging carefully through the well-packed earth, taking samples of bark, leaves, flowers, and any remains they could find, all eyes alert for any sign of ancient curiosities or artifacts that may have been abandoned an age ago.

"22mi," Leo droned, his eyes flashing, and Gabriel winced.

"Keep a steady pace," Na'than urged them as they crept forward. "We have a few hours here before nightfall, and then we're back to camp for the evening. The villages must be nearby, and we're going to want plenty of time to search them thoroughly before anyone has a chance to fall ill."

Gabriel's head felt somewhat light; holding his breath for a moment, the sensation passed, and he scooped up a dead squirrel with his forceps. The tiny creature's fur was pale violet, its teeth unnervingly large. Examining it swiftly, he tucked it into the bag with the leupak skull, then made his way down a small dirt path nearby.

"Hey-- *Hey!* I've found it!" he shouted, turning on his heel at once as the party rose from their tasks to meet him.

Just behind him, the dense forest seemed to recede, leaving a clearing large enough to fit several of Liam's dinosaurs in, nose-to-tail.

And seated just within were hundreds of abandoned wooden homes, worn away and broken by weather and time-- and perhaps more violent forces, as well.
Shattered and pulverized objects lay in the loamy dirt and soft grass, buried under fallen beams and tucked between the ribcages and fingerbones of people long-dead. Shards of ancient pottery, metal tools and glass bottles littered the ground. Tiny, precious scraps of cloth hung from doorways and cracked statues.

Gabriel walked slowly, carefully through the scene, touching nothing. This place had been undisturbed for an inmeasurable length of time-- undoubtedly, the mirajin radiation seeping from the earth was enough to slay anything wandering in unprepared.
Suddenly, he felt as though he had no business being here; this was final the resting place of an entire people.

Could he truly dig through it for valuables and information, take what he liked, and then simply leave after having defiled it?

"Come on, Gabe. Don't break down on us now," Na'than said, noting the human's troubled expression and uneasy gait. "You feeling alright?"

"I'm not so sure this is--"

The village grounds seemed uncomfortably bright, and *hot*; Gabe squinted his eyes, placing a hand to his head. "...ugh, it's awful here. Does forest crystallization really raise the temperature so much?"

"Gabe?!"

Perhaps that was the cause; perhaps he simply wasn't feeling well.

With a soft groan, Gabriel dropped slowly onto one knee, then fell into the soft grass as his legs buckled beneath him, his vision and thoughts

fading away like smoke.

"Medic! We have a man down! Get over here, now!"

The sound of a single keening fiddle filled the plaza with joy, villagers flocking like hungry birds to forget the cares of the fleeting day. *Aeneski* danced in pairs and circles around the young musician as he played his song-- a heartfelt tribute to the goddess of the sky and the winds of fortune she carried upon her wings to the allied tribes.

Nearby, an elf clad in a woven kilt and furs lounged beneath a shady tree, smoking from a small pipe and chattering with a small group of young women settled around him.

"He's good with that thing, isn't he? Me and him, we play together all the time. *What?* What do *I* play? *Anything, for you...*" he purred, neatly dodging the question.

The musician began to play his song faster and faster, dancing gracefully in a circle as his audience clapped and stomped and cheered in time. With a dramatic toss of his head, he ended his tune with a final crescendo, raising his bow into the air and amidst applause and pleas for an encore.

But as he dipped his head and instrument to take his bows, the crowd began to quickly disperse, their excitable chatter softening into whispers as people scattered to the four winds, returning to their daily chores or slipping away into their homes, glancing over their shoulders in their haste.

"Aw, come on. Party's over already? That was only three songs... I mean, Aqk would expect more, *just saying*."

As the musician lifted his head, the cause of his audience's swift departure was revealed.
A small, sleek figure draped in furs and old bones emerged from the woods nearby, intricate patterns painted over its pale, freckled skin, and grey mud caking its webbed toes-- and a massive, bleached alligator's skull completed the feral visage, hiding the wearer's head save for an enormous shock of matted red hair.

Tucking his instrument under one arm, his expression darkened faintly.

"If you're here to cause trouble, just go back into the swamp. We were having a good time out here, and you'll *not* ruin my mood today."

The little Mod'han came to a stop before the musician, his arms folded neatly across his painted chest, his voice as cold as the green eyes peering from within the skull's white brow.
"If only we could *all* be so noble and beloved as you, *Sheanh Kelan*," he spat. "Didn't you see how everyone fled the scene once I arrived?"

Kelan sighed softly; not *this* again. "Your aura of hostility precedes you."

"Hostility?" The shaman laughed derisively. "No, that's the aura of *terror* I inherited at birth."

"Gabe? Gabe, come on, buddy. Wake up-- you're freaking us all out, here..."

Gabriel's eyes were sore; blinking rapidly, he slowly lifted his head.
Na'than and Felld were standing over him, expressions of concern upon their faces.

"Are you alright? We were worried we'd lost you; you fainted, but... your eyes remained open as though you were still awake. *Twitching.*"

Carefully opening a canteen, he offered it to the Doc, who drank slowly. Gabe took a moment to gather his thoughts, pressing his free hand to his head in a feeble attempt to ease his pounding headache.

"I... I don't know what just happened," he admitted. "I was awake, and then I was... *here*, but..."

"But?" Felld urged.

The scientist sighed deeply, lying his head back again and closing his eyes. He'd definitely lost the plot, now-- there was no question of that.

"I think I saw a fragment of the *past*..."

Book V Chapter 13: Crystalline

The Ruins of Arvda, North Dreamsong

"Do we carry out the will of the planet simply by being who we are and doing what we do, or are we meant to fight against our natures?" Lyric'Ai wondered.

Few people ventured this far into the deep woods of North Dreamsong-- rumors of the dangerous faeries who dwelt in the unsettled zones were more than enough to keep civil folk safely at home in Gier, Axl, and Faerwethr.

And so it was that this place had gone all but unknown for countless years, free from the grabbing hands of scientists, researchers, and treasure hunters.

Arvda Village was once a sizeable Anshe settlement-- inhabited by the *Aen'och Sibeoanh*, the ancestors of the Dremish Aeneski.
Now, nothing remained of the people who lived and dreamed here but old, twisted bones, their wooden homes and structures transformed into solid crystal around them.
As a grisly centerpiece to the surreal scene, the skeleton of an immense dragon lay amidst the rubble and alien weeds, its birdlike jaw open wide in a scream of rage it had never finished.

Lyric'Ai sat quietly upon one knee within the village plaza, his head bowed low and eyes closed as distant memories flooded his mind, threatening to crush his will into dust.
As he always did when he visited this place, he wanted nothing more than to run, to forget what had come to pass here, forget that Arvda ever even existed.

But he could never live with himself if he were to insult the fallen in such a manner, and so he remained where he was, soaking in the discomfort like cold and bitter rain.

"My siblings have their ways, and they seek to mold the world to their liking. My father has his way, and he wishes the same.
Do they deserve to suffer for the way they are, their points of view and their mistakes?
"Do I deserve to suffer for my errors in judgement?"

No answers came to him.

Slowly rising to his feet, he pushed his hair away from his face for just a moment, looking upon the dead village as it shimmered in the light like a mirage.

"I forgive them for their mistakes, and I love them for who they are, not in spite of it," he whispered to the dragon's skeleton. "But there is no one to look upon my misdeeds and forgive me but myself, and I *cannot* do that."

The dead flarion stared at him, screaming in silence.

Book V Chapter 14: Cat's Eyes

Chimaera are a proud and shameless race, stopping at nothing to turn a profit, even at the expense of friends and family.

But even amongst the ruthless, dog-eat-dog world of the Chimaera, there are limits-- *and taboos*.

They do not discuss the manticores, how they come about, or where they end up.

The creatures simply appear in cages in black markets and caravans-- and they vanish shortly afterwards, sold off to some distant collector who knows no better... or perhaps simply knows *just enough*.

No one asks anything; not about the manticores' strikingly human faces or their scale-plated, leonine bodies.

Not about the obvious look of intelligence, fear, and sadness in their cats' eyes.

The Chimaera prefer it that way.

It's for the best for all involved.

Book V Chapter 15: Noblewind

Heaven's Pillar Ruins, Aensdoun

The Court swept meticulously over the Heaven's Pillar ruins, leaving no stone unturned, no corner unchecked.
They moved as one entity, each pair of hands working in unison to collect, clean, sort, and chart each artifact and tablet the expedition uncovered.

No one said a word, for no one needed to; this was the perfection of the Erosions' connected minds. No need for time wasted sending away correspondence, shipping new pieces of information, or waiting for further instructions.

The Silent Rose only wished they possessed such innate efficiency.

Silently, they studied their finds and considered the implications.

Across the ruins, several Courtesans cleared the dust away from an old panel, carved with dancing figures of various dragons and animals below them.

Centered beneath the scene, three stood side by side; a crocodilian, a bear, and an eagle with its wings spread wide.

The Courtesans knelt down, opening their journals to painstakingly copy the mysterious runes carved below the panel.

Dilndrou crawled out onto the beach, paying little mind to the odd white zeppelin settled nearby.
The ocean water had stung at his wounds mercilessly; with no way to safely return to the woods around Lassenbhurg to gather herbs to heal them, he was left with no choice but to swim back for Aensdoun as swiftly as he could.

On the brighter side of things, the bloodied water caught the attention of several sharks before long, which he ate gratefully before continuing on his way, saving him the trouble of hunting while wounded.

Now, however, there was the matter of the Sacred Grove and Voghn's mutts to handle.

Could they have crossed the sea already-- or was there still time to warn Sasha?

With a pained growl, he rose to his feet again and made his way into the wood. His bogs weren't far from here; once Sasha knew of the danger, he could return to his laboratory and rest.

As he trotted over the solid earth, the jewel-blue sky caught Dilndrou's attention, and he sighed heavily.
The last time the wolves had ever proven a threat, they were part of the Aen'och Trior-- three avatars with three powerful tribes at their service.

Now, only he and Sasha remained; the Trior destroyed, his own silisks and basilisks dispersed across the world.

And Aqk...

Dilndrou stopped in his tracks, lifting his great head to bellow so thunderously that the nearby Anshe tribes looked in confusion at the clear

skies in search of rainclouds.

No one would dare interrupt his sorrowful cries-- and the winds grew calm and still, as though to mourn with him.

He watched with dark eyes as the tiny faeries danced and celebrated within their villages, reveling in the light of the suns and the gentle breezes that whipped their hair about and tickled their faces.
High overhead, an enormous bird spun and wheeled about through the air, laughing melodiously as she shared the joy of her people restricted to the earth below. Her golden feathers glittered in the sunlight as she beat her wings, calling out again and again to the winds to carry her aloft-- to lift the hearts and spirits of the Aen'och Trior to fly with her.

Dilndrou did not wish to fly; as the first alchemist, he could craft magic potions and spells to grant him wings, or even his sister's graceful form, if he so wished it.
But his place was within the brackish water and soft mud of the earth; he honored and respected the winds as they respected him, but they truly belonged only to Aqk.

And so he was content to watch, and allow her to enjoy her time in the sunlight.

The three avatar-siblings shared many things, and joy was the greatest of all; a precious and vital stuff as free and shining as Aqk herself.

Book V Chapter 16: Courting the Rose

The Grand Library Jetersborough, South Dreamsong

The sound of something solid slamming into a nearby wall roused Ecleco from his peaceful slumber with a start.
Rolling onto his side and out of the bed, he drowsily rubbed his eyes as he made his way out into the office, narrowly sidestepping an artisan-carved chair as it tumbled noisily across the room.

Much to his surprise, the source of the racket had been none other than Marquise herself; upset documents floated lightly onto the floor around her as she stood before her desk, teeth gritted in a fearsome scowl, eyes flashing with unreserved hatred.

"--should've thought this through more carefully, shouldnt've been so quick to send her off..."

Ecleco stared in shock; this was not proper conduct for any Courtesan, let alone the Lady herself.
"Marky, what--"

She froze in place for a moment before spinning on her heel to face him.
"*One of those Chimaera bastards assaulted my Paloma!*" she snarled, looking as completely unhinged as he'd ever seen her.

Steeling himself, he walked up to place a hand on her shoulder. "Wha-- *who!?* Calm down-- we can work something out, we just--"
But as he spoke, the office door swung open, allowing another Courtesan in. She was nearly formless and transparent; a vague, humanoid shape with eyes a watery green.
She drifted in silently, exchanging a wordless glance with Marquise before turning to open a nearby window.

Ecleco's eyes darkened.

"You're sending Nereida?
Marky, *come on*. I know you're upset-- me, too, but isn't this kinda hasty--" His words died on his lips as Marquise's venomous gaze fell upon him.

"There are times for careful actions and patience, Ecleco, but this is too far.None of my Courtesans deserve this sort of treatment-- or should even have reason to fear it-- least of all poor Paloma.
She only just left to serve a few weeks ago, and... this. *This!* I should never have sent her to Lucsus. I've ruined her before she even had a chance to start, and now what can she do? What can *I* do?"

"Hey, come on," Ecleco pleaded gently. "You're not blaming yourself for this. Why don't you sit down--" he paused, eyeing the chair lying across the room."Erm, I mean, just try to relax, and we can think of a better way to handle this. We can't just off and *kill the guy,* even if he *did* pull the first punch!"

The elemental Courtesan had frozen in place, waiting patiently to recieve a final command, her eyes devoid of emotion as she watched them.

Marquise looked down at the papers strewn across the floor; meticulously organized work, scattered like fallen leaves in her wake.
What did it even matter?"I've already failed her, Ecleco. I have to punish him for this, little as it may do."

"But it's a bad idea to let your feelings guide your hand like this. I mean, it's not like you. Even under pressure," he sighed. "It just feels so... sloppy."

Marquise furrowed her brow, sighing heavily.
Suddenly, Nereida sprang into action again, neatly slipping out of the open window without a word.

"I guess that's my answer, huh?" Ecleco frowned.

"It's been quite some time since you last tended to our mother, hasn't it?" Marquise replied, smoothly avoiding his question. "Make plans to head out to Laps-du-Ment at once."

He blinked in shock; surely, she wasn't-- "H-hang on a second," He began. "You're just gonna try and get rid of me now? This isn't *fair!*"

"That was an *order, Courtesan Ecleco*."

So *that's* how it was.
Pursing his lips and lying his ears back flat, he sulkily turned for the door.

"... I guess I'll go pack, then."

The Cathedral of a Thousand Roses Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

The faerie walked briskly through the Cathedral halls, his expression aloof, his demeanor chilly as always; he had little time for this labyrinth of artificial lights and man-made walls.
Nimbly, he turned sideways just short of barreling into a passing leupak, offering no excuse or apology, just hurrying on, hurrying on.

Lilendril wanted nothing more than to complete his task and return outside at once; he was a nymph, after all, and every moment he spent in this hell of trendy Chimri interior design and nervous scientists was another lost moment he would have rather spent basking in the sunlight in his-- natch, the Lord-Doctor's-- extravagant gardens.

Finally, he arrived at the grand set of double doors leading to his employer's study; he rapped delicately upon the carved wood with a white-gloved hand.

""Milord. *Milord!*" he snapped impatiently at the doors, only mildly relieved when they swung open.
Nefirian's expression was one of mild concern. "Lilendril. Why--"

"You've guests, sir," he explained dryly, looking respectfully aside as the Chapter cringed.
"Faction?"

"The Court."

The lesser of two evils in terms of danger, but far worse for successfully keeping up appearances. Nefirian swore loudly, spinning on his heel and marching back into the study.
Lilendril was visibly unamused at not having been dismissed at once, but obediently followed him inside.

The room was enormous, filled to the brim with shelves and desks dripping with books, jars, and various curiosities. Tiny lizards scurried across the floors and bookshelves like mice, nibbling at any little insects and spiders they could find hidden in corners and crevices, while an enormous white bird like a cross beween a peacock and a parrot sat patiently within a gilded cage by the desk, preening its feathers as it eyed

the nymph with mild interest.

The Lord Doctor hurried over to the desk, stuffing loose pages into books, slamming journals shut, and dropping the lot into drawers and cabinets before locking them securely.

"Better question. Do you *recognize* them?" he asked tersely.

The Court being what they were-- which was, precisely, *the Court*-- it was imperative for him to keep their numbers in Laps as low as possible; a single determined and lucky Courtesan could potentially weasel their way close enough to the Mimorre Ridge to have a clear view of what was transpiring back there.
The mountains bordering Mimore were the most heavily-guarded and restricted area in all of Chimre; travelers were strongly warned against wandering behind the city of Laps-du-Ment on threat of death, *regardless of faction*, and traveling squadrons of iicarn ensured that anyone who challenged the rule was dealt with accordingly.

But the Court was a difficult case.

He was *obliged* to allow its members into his cities as well as the Cathedral; refusing a Courtesan in his position would have been a direct defiance of the Court and a personal insult to Marquise herself.
To make matters *worse*, they were to be allowed access to Opus in order to keep an eye on her, which meant Courtesans were regularly traveling in and out of his own home.

Then, there was the matter of the Erosions' apparent mental link with Marquise herself.
Just one of the dragons discovering some of his more sensitive information, even for a split second, would jeopardize the entire Organization.

Of course, if that had happened, he imagined whoever had arrived wouldnt've bothered waiting before the Cathedral gates for his servants to allow them entry.

"Sir Ecleco, and a second Courtesan," Lilendril offered, glaring darkly at the white bird; he could *hardly stand* avians.

"...*Ecleco*."

Nef breathed a sigh of relief. The boy was a glorified Bastion; he wouldn't cause any sort of trouble.
"It must be the new rotation. Go ahead and send them in."
"As you wish, milord."

Lilendril couldn't get back outside fast enough.
Making his way through the gardens, he unlocked and pulled open the gates, bowing stiffly as Ecleco and his companion made their way inside.

"Welcome, sir. The Lord Doctor is busy in his study; I trust you know your way to the Greatmother?" he asked, raising his voice to drown out an odd hissing noise coming from nearby.
"Yeah, I think so. Don't worry about us, we'll find our way--"
But before Ecleco could finish his sentence, the faerie leapt up with a shout, hurrying away through the gardens as a small herd of snarling swans rushed up to greet him, beaks snapping and gnashing at him all the while.

The Courtesans stifled a laugh, making their way up the garden path towards the Cathedral. A second nymph casually strode up to hold open the front doors for them with a mischevious grin, as though laughing inwardly at some unspoken joke.

"Welcome, welcome! Sorry about Lilendril. He's popular with the waterfowl, you know," he giggled. "Water lily and all that."

Ecleco broke into a smile. "Did you..."

But the garden fae shrugged his shoulders innocently. "Egg them on? Why, of *course not*. I might have shooed them off in his general direction, but only by coincidence. *Honest."*
"Of course."
"Either way-- I'm Gardenio, and I'll be your escort to the Greatmother's chamber. Lilendril hates being indoors, anyhow," he added brightly. "He's got a *thing*. You know."

Ecleco didn't know, but decided it wasn't important.

Gardenio led the two Courtesans through the Cathedral halls, happily chattering to them about the lovely weather in Chimre and the quality of the blooms in the garden as he went.
Ecleco had just started to tune the excitable little nymph out, when he heard a distant rumble that vibrated the base of the great building.

Curious, he glanced out of a window; the sky was Chimre's typical dazzling shade of pinkish-orange, with not a stormcloud in sight.

"Hm, the thunder is surprisingly powerful for such a clear day," he remarked absently.
Gardenio's eyes widened. "Did you hear *thunder*? Perhaps it was from Wimsie-Pointe; have you heard of it? The City of Perpetual Rain, they call it."
"Perpetual rain? That sounds like a dreary place," he said, listening as another rumble sounded in the distance.
"It's actually quite lovely, if you like rain... *well*. I suppose it *is* rather dreary, if you don't," Gardenio laughed.
"It's not far from here, though-- a glitch of the mirajin has affected the precipitation there. It's been raining nonstop for almost seventy years. The leupaks love the place, though..."

A curious humanoid creature paused beside a stairwell just before them, catching Ecleco's eye.
It was tall and extremely lanky, wrapped in a ragged-looking black robe from which two long, storklike black legs seemed to sprout, while serpentine, coiling antlers crowned its head, and a pair of brilliant, insectoid blue wings buzzed just behind its shoulders.
The thing regarded the Courtesans with its large, iridescent eyes before carefully stepping aside to let them pass.

Ecleco resisted the urge to turn and continue staring at it as they ascended the stairs. "What was-- nevermind," he said, immediately thinking better of the question.
Oblivious, Gardenio continued to chatter about the rain in Wimsie-Pointe as they continued their journey.

The Cathedral of a Thousand Roses was enormous, and the poor Courtesans' aching feet were a testament to the countless hallways and staircases that made up the interior of the Chimri grand palace. Several times throughout their journey, strategically-placed Cronois leupaks directed the small group away from a particular bend or doorway, and Ecleco dimly wondered what secrets were hidden beyond them.

He was uncertain if he ever wished to find out.

"And at long last, here we are," Gardenio announced in a singsong voice, bowing with a flourish before an enormous door, crafted from some mysterious violet metal.
He drew a deep breath.
"Welcome to the Mirajin Chamber. To remind you of Silent Rose Organization protocol, you are restricted to the zones designated on pamphlet C-254428, which you will be given upon entering the Mirajin Chamber.
Please bear in mind that the waiver you signed upon first agreeing to perform services on the behalf of the Court within the Cathedral of a Thousand Roses of Laps-du-Ment has been filed within our archives and is available at any time for review.

Three full meals will be provided for you free of charge while you are living on the premises, and snacks are available at any time by simply ringing the complimentary service bell found within your living quarters.

Please refrain from disturbing any surveilance-varani you come across during your stay within the Cathedral.
Any documents or materials found within the Cathedral are the property of the Silent Rose Organization and are not to be removed from the premises. Violating this guideline may result in strict disciplinary action by the Silent Rose Organization and/or the Court.
If you should have any questions, comments, or concerns, please make use of your complimentary service bell at any time and a representative will be happy to address your needs.

Thank you for your service within the Cathedral of a Thousand Roses. We hope you enjoy your stay and do not suffer any ill effects from your close proximity to the Fatis Mirajin!"

Ecleco idly wondered how many Courtesans had learned that speech by heart.

As Gardenio carefully pulled the enormous metal doors open, the Courtesans stepped inside, squinting their eyes in the dazzling pink light as they made their way inside and down the catwalks.

The Fatis Mirajin towered above them, an enormous crystal seated before a wide, solid glass window looking out upon the blue forests just behind the city.
Far below, leupaks and Courtesans worked and sat, taking notes, observing their surroundings, gathering tiny chicklets in baskets, and simply gazing in awe and wonder at the great crystal-- and the equally magnificent black dragon coiled around its base.

Opus slept peacefully, her horned head settled atop her folded paws as her serpentine tail gently swished across the tiled floor. Nearby, a Courtesan lay in dragon form, curled up and asleep beside the Greatmother, her head nestled in against the larger dragon's shoulder.

As Ecleco gazed silently down at her, another peal of thunder shook the Cathedral.
Swearing quietly, he lifted his head as a vividly-hued leupak waddled up to greet him.

"Those must be some storms in Wimsie-Pointe tonight." Ecleco murmured.
"Oh, you've *no idea*," the leupak replied, her eyes glinting dangerously.

Book V Chapter 17: The Lap of Luxury

Chimre is a country known throughout the world for its sumptuous way of life. No expense is spared to obtain the finest Valenth has to offer in food, fashion, and the latest gadgets and genetic fads.

Of particular note in recent times is the rise of the chilleon-- a fluffy-furred mountain rodent common near the Mimorre Ridge.
It has become popular among Chimre's elite (and if you live above the Underbelly, you *are* part of Chimre's elite) to own large numbers of the furry creatures, all the better to cuddle with them in lounge chairs during chilly nights, or allow them to accompany you en masse on your trips to the market.

Chilleon breeders and sellers insist upon high prices for the creatures, citing an extremely limited supply and a massive demand with waiting lists miles long.

Only one of those statements is true.

Little do most people of Chimre know, enormous quantities of chilleon have been making their way down from the Mimorre Ridge to find safe new burrows-- and the timing of their mass exodus seems to coincide perfectly with the recent, thunderous booms that can be heard from Laps-du-Ment as of late...

Book V Chapter 18: The Evening After

Heaven's Pillar Forest,Aensdoun

Gabriel felt like shit.

Deliberately, he dug his toes into the beach sand, staring at his handiwork as though he intended to count each damp grain.

His brain pulsed and pounded painfully within his skull; he wondered if he had hit his head when he blacked out. With how quickly it had happened, it was likely no one had time to react.

It wasn't as though he had included this sort of thing in his medical notes. It wasn't as though this sort of thing *had ever happened to him before*.

Pressing his hand against his head, he winced and clenched his eyes shut, wishing the suns could humor him enough to set that very moment.

"...Gabriel," Felldcalled softly.
The single word had been enough to cause his world to explode in pain; he gritted his teeth and snarled loudly in response, which only made matters worse.

"... the more I see of this, the more I'm starting to think he's almost certainly one, Felld," Na'than whispered, pulling the leupak aside. "The Master gets bad headaches like this sometimes after he's exerted himself. He should probably have some time to himself for a while."

Gabe appreciated Na'th's courtesy, but he heard him as though he was an inch away from his ear, and suffered for it.
He dimly realized he shouldn'tve been able to; the leupak and the *Aeneski* were a good distance away from him before they resumed their conversation.

With a whimper, he slowly rolled forward onto his hands and knees, curling up in the soft sand and hiding his face from the painful rays of the setting suns.

"...And when do you intend to tell him?"

"*Never*," Na'than began, regret in his voice. "That's not my job-- it's not my *duty*. His superior'll give him the rundown and everything he needs to know..."

Not far away, one of the archaeologists waded out into the crystalline water, gazing deeply in as he took one slow step after another.

Gabe saw the look of awe on the man's face; he saw him bend down in the water with his hands cupped to gently lift a tiny, boneless creature into them. All arms, the little cephalopod seemed to wave up at him.
But his eyes were closed, and his head was down against the sand.

How could he have seen *anything?*

But the startling realization was pushed aside by another, more pressing one. Gritting his teeth to steel himself, he threw his head up and screamed, his head seeming to split open in the agony of his own voice.
"...Put that down! *It's a Stellar*!"

But Gabe knew his warning had come too late.

The man lifted his head to meet the Bio Doc's eyes just as the little octopus bit down into the flesh of his palm.
He screamed and threw the creature back into the water; Gabriel pressed his head back into the sand and clenched his eyes shut tight.

He didn't want to see the archaeologist's hand blacken, his blood vessels collapsing one after another in the wake of the destructive toxin flowing through them; he didn't want to hear the man's strangled gasp of pain, the splash of the water around his knees as he succumbed to the near-instant paralysis--

But he saw and heard and *felt* everything, with his head down and eyes shut, hands clamped over his ears.

He felt Na'than's calloused hands on his shoulders, and he felt his throat wearing raw with the force of his own tormented, desperate screaming.

"STOP IT! *MAKE IT STOP!* **GET OUT OF MY HEAD!"**

Book V Chapter 19: Q&A;

Heaven's Pillar Forest,Aensdoun

"Just so you know, I'm not supposed to tell you this," Na'than began with more than a little guilt in his voice, pressing a hand against his face.

"Tell me... *what*, precisely?"

Gabriel didn't really want to ask.

Really, he didn't want to do *anything* but go back home, purchase a small lead box, find a scenic area in Dreamsong's countryside and lock himself within-- but that didn't seem terribly likely, considering he was sitting in the middle of Aensdoun with a burly engineer and a tree as the only thing between him and the threat of sudden, grisly death.

Twenty-foot carnivorous dinosaurs were one thing, but when you had seen a smiling octopus as tall as someone's thumb slay a man with a single nip, you stopped worrying about what looked threatening and started worrying about the fact that *you were currently alive, and thus, eligible to die.*

Possibly-- no, *likely* horribly.

And then there was the matter of the creepy headache thing. Maybe he hadn't had enough fiber in his diet.

Na'than glanced over his shoulder towards the camp; they were far enough away that no one should've been able to hear their conversation, but near enough to be in plain sight, and thus hopefully not seem suspicious.

He sighed.

"Right, so, um... When you found out about thevarworgnearAxl, we-- we meaning theOrganization, not *me*, because *I'm* not a scientist-- well, not a *biological* scientist, anyway, I guess I'm a scientist but I do, like, robotics and stuff.
But anyway, we... *they* decided to put you on observation. Not that you did anything *wrong!* But just to, um... see if anything was *off*. Or something. You know. You *don't* know! But I'm telling you. Because you *don't*. Even though I *shouldn't*. Because you *should*," he gasped.

Gabe stared blankly at him. "...go on."

"Right, sorry. Uh.. so, anyway, you weren't sent here so you could study inAensdoun. I mean, you were, but that's not the *main* reason. Because, see, there's this, um--" Na'than turned to glance over his shoulder again, pricking his ears up-- "*program*. For people who..."

"Hold on a minute." Gabe narrowed his eyes. "You mean to tell me that I was sent here *to die* for my first mission as some kind of experiment? That's great, Na'th. *That's really great.* Why? *Why me?* Why in the hell couldn't I have just stayed home in Axl and felt sorry for myself and my *shit luck* until a freak lab accident had me beheaded by exploding beaker shrapnel? What in the *fuck* could I have possibly done to deserve my life? Tell me, huh? I'm *dying to kn*--"

An unearthly scream pierced their ears; in the distance, a large, green zemoira came thundering into view, a small figure perched upon its neck.

Na'than turned to watch them arrive, his ears laid back flat against the sides of his head.

"No. Don't you *turn away from me!* I don't care about Liam. *Answer me, damnit!* Like you said-- I have a right to know!"

A wide shadow flitted over the grasslands beyond the forest; closer now, Gabe could see Liam flatten himself against Alice's back as if in anticipation.

Suddenly, the sky exploded into flame; the dinosaur screamed again, hurling herself aside just as the fireball connected with the earth, searing the grasses into ash in an instant.
A sinuous, red monster the likes of which the Bio Doc had never seen dropped from the air, landing heavily where Alice and Liam had been just moments before, spreading enormous wings and raising its horned neck with a mighty hiss.

Clapping his hands over his mouth to stifle his scream, the scientist pressed himself against the tree as he watched, fear washing over him.

But the dragon paused. Slowly, it turned its head, eyes narrowing into slits as they met Gabriel's.

"... you *have to be kidding me--"*

Before he had time to react, Gabe felt Na'than's grip on his shoulders, dragging him upright, shoving him away.

"*JUST* RUN!"

In an instant, the thing launched itself towards them, eyes wild with ferocity, its previous target all but forgotten.
It slammed forcedfully into the trees, claws cleaving into the hard trunks as it curled around them, the smell of sulfur strong in the air behind them.

Na'than yelled ahead to the expedition members, but they had already seen the dragon's approach; belongings and precious tools and packages were grabbed as people fled the camp, scattering in all directions.

Desperate, Gabriel skirted around the camp, leaping over thick roots and ducking under low branches, Na'than running close beside him.
He heard the dragon's pounding feet not far behind him; he didn't dare to look back-- *why couldn't he -see things- now, when it would've been useful?!*-- certain the thing would gain on him just enough to open its mouth and...

"Why me?! Why in the hell is it chasing ME?!" he shrieked, trying to ignore the burning pain in his legs.

"Because," Na'than gasped, "you're a--"

With a warning scream, Alice burst headfirst out of the deep woods, plowing into the pursuing dragon with a sickening crunch. She dug her little claws into the monster's side, snapping her jaws at its throat as the two reptiles tumbled over the ground, tails and wings whipping in a fury.

Leaping down from a branch high above, Liam dropped onto his feet with a glaive in hand; he charged into the fray with a bellowing cry of his own, swinging the weapon forward in a wide arc. It cut a vicious gash across the dragon's chest.
Knocking Alice aside, the beast drew a breath, spewing a stream of fire that Liam nimbly dodged, momentarily bathing his scarred shoulder in golden light.

Na'than leapt into a nearby tree, dragging a protesting Gabe up after him.

"Son of a *bitch... "Dinosaur eggs"*, huh? I *knew* something was off about him..."

Gabe just pursed his lips and made an angry little noise.

Alice and Liam circled the wounded dragon, wings still spread in a threat display, its jaws held wide open as it hissed and bellowed.

"This is between you and me," Liam rumbled, his tone even. "That's all it ever has been, and all it ever will be. I know you bastards can hold a grudge that would make a Flarion balk, but that doesn't phase me none."

The dragon narrowed its eyes, threw its head and shrieked.

"I can't hold that against you, no," Liam admitted. "You have your job to do as a parent, after all. But I've got my job to do, too, and as long as you're between me and it-- *well.* You're worth enough that I don't mind *that*, either!"

At his last word, the beast charged, diving in to swipe at the elf before peeling away just as he swung his weapon, the pair exchanging blows and dancing away from the other's strikes in a fatal dance.

Crouching low to the ground, Alice sprung forward, landing solidly atop the dragon's back just as it started to lunge again.
Pinned, it beat its wings against the ground and screamed in fury-- a sound that gurgled wetly in its throat as Liam thrust the blade of his glaive into the beast's neck.
It trembled violently, thrashed, and finally lay still, blood pooling beneath its monstrous head.

"Peace to you now, old woman," Liam said softly, wrenching his weapon free and wiping it clean on the scorched grass nearby.

Na'than dropped from his branch like a stone, striding slowly forward to confront the other *Aeneski*, his head raised high and eyes flashing.
"Now that you've finished with that, *Liam*... you can answer a few questions for me." The silver-haired elf growled low, a hint of threat in his voice Gabe had never heard before.
Liam rose to his feet, opening his mouth to casually reply; the words died on his lips as their eyes locked and he faltered, considering the shorter man with some concern.

"...what the hell *are you*," he breathed.

"*I'm* the one doing the asking," Na'th barked in sharp reply. "Why has that rampant been chasing you around? How were you speaking to it-- and what did it say to you?"

Liam frowned. "I didn't lie, I swear. I supply eggs to the Chimaera, and they distribute them--"

"*What. Kind. Of eggs.*" Na'than arched his back slightly, baring his teeth; the simple motion sent a chill down Gabe's spine.

"Dinosaur eggs. Zemoira, thanatogon, drakes... and, uh. *Dragon eggs.*" He admitted the last at a whisper.

Na'than folded his arms across his chest. "Mmhmm. Now--"

"They're intelligent. The... the rampants. Always have been, probably. I started collecting their eggs a few years ago, and I swear the entire population of Aensdoun knows about me now. They tell each other what's going on, I think they told each other what I fucking look like, that I have a dinosaur," Liam added.

"The Chimaera are fucking idiots, and so are the people who buy the things. But I make good money out here-- I'll be set for *life* when I go home, I already am-- so I stay, and I collect the eggs. They haven't killed me yet, it's good fun, and I'm out in my element."
Na'than cleared his throat; Liam swallowed, glancing away towards the dragon's corpse.
"That's a female; I found her nest a little while ago, and she's been after me. I don't "speak" their language, whatever the hell it is.

But the noises they make, the way they look at you... you can tell what they mean well enough. She hated me for taking her children away. Could you blame her? *I can't.*"

"You don't take all of the eggs from the nests, do you?"

"No, sir. I make sure to leave half; I don't visit the same nest twice in a year. No point in ruining the population and cutting my own operations short."

Na'than nodded slowly, appeased. "Mm. Does the Court know about this?"

"Not from me."

"...alright," Na'than said. "As far as we're concerned, we don't know you exist, and as far as you're concerned, *we* never wired any money to your bank account in Lassenbhurg."

Liam blinked, then grinned widely. "You got it. Oh-- what about the..." He made a gesture towards Na'th's face.

Na'than smirked. "I don't know about *you*, and you don't know about *me*."

The two elves shook hands; Na'than turned to make his way back to Gabriel in the tree, while Liam knelt to began dismantling his dragon.

"Now that you're done," Gabe snapped, "perhaps you'd like to answer *my ques*--"

"Gabe, you're what's called a *psychic beacon*," Na'than answered simply.

Book V Chapter 20: Shine A Little Light

Heaven's Pillar Forest,Aensdoun

Gabriel sat upon the tree branch as Na'than approached with his arms folded over his chest. The silver-haired *Aeneski* gazed steadily up at him, his watery blue eyes full of ferocity and intent.

It wasn't a look Gabe had ever been on the other side of before, and he wasn't certain he liked it. The sky had begun to shift to a vivid shade of orange-on-pink as the suns began to kiss the horizon.

Gabriel briefly remembered Na'than's vague warnings about nightfall; he decided, instantly, that he couldn't care less right now.

"I'm a *what now?* Listen, Na'th-- we're friends and all, but today is not a good day to play games with me. So stop fucking around and just be straight with me, alright?"

"*Watch your tone with me, Gabriel*. We're "friends and all", as you put it-- but I'm *still* your superior. By a *long shot*," Na'than warned him, prompting a startled blink from Gabe.

So he was-- Gabriel was Third Class personnel-- a *new kid*, barely with his foot in the door of the Organization.

Na'than was *Omega Rank*, on par with Chimre's GreaterHouselords. There was no higher.

Not unless you were the Dreamwaker himself.

"This information isn't mine to give you, but I'm giving it to you anyway, just know that. I'm disobeying Organization protocol in the hopes of shining a little light on your troubles. You're a psychic-- a *psion*, whichever you prefer-- which carries certain implications in itself. But you're a psychic *beacon*, which means you're not going to be talking to people or throwing things with your mind.
"It... doesn't work that way."

"Of course not-- Dreamwaker forbid I should end up with a *useful* ability," Gabe sighed.

"Oh, *no*. You're only a *human* with such mental power that the Silent Rose Organization has dedicated an *entire department* to finding people like you and *convincing you to work for us*," Na'than snapped. "Would you please stop *feeling sorry for yourself*, just for half a moment? Yes, you've had a hard life, okay-- but it may surprise you to realize that *lots of us have*.
"I was a fucking construction slave all through my early years, and I've got the *brand in my back to prove it*. So really. *Can it*."

"You...*fuck*. *Fuck, Na'th*, I-- I'm sorry, I didn't--" Gabe stammered, his face growing red.

But the elf merely nodded. "Apologize by realizing I'm trying to *help you*." He hoisted himself back up onto the sturdy branch to sit nearby, leaning his back against the tree's enormous trunk.
"From what my Master's told and shown me, beacons are... *passive* psychics. You don't really do anything on your own, but you draw supernaturals that're sensitive to psychic energy. Hostiles will be compelled to find and *murder you* to stop the feedback, yeah-- but everything else'll just be drawn to you, whether they realize..."
Na'than stopped mid-sentence, swinging down on one arm and dropping out of the tree.

"What? *What?"*

"It's getting dark," Na'th murmured, shoving his hands into his pockets and making his way off into the woods.

"Get back to camp, alright? I'll talk to you in the morning."

Sliding down out of the tree, Gabriel watched him go in silence.
He sat down behind a nearby boulder, wrapping his arms around his legs and settling his chin on his knees.

He felt the cool breeze muss his hair as he watched Chira rise, a pale, violet globe bathed in the suns' reflected light.

The Valenthian moon was always full and perfect; its light shone in the moisture of Gabriel's eyes.

"I'm no fool, and on top of that, I'm a Bio Doc, whether or not I'm a psion," Gabe murmured to himself. "Even moreso... I'm a Bio Doc who's seen some strange shit, and I've studied way too much about these things. *I get it, Na'th.* I get it now. I don't understand what *I* am yet... but I know what you *are*.
"*I* know."

In the moon's pale violet light, a gargantuan white wolf gazed down at him from atop the boulder, blue eyes blazing.

Book V Chapter 21: Army

Her antennae touched it, slid along smooth scales and tasted blood.

She was almost overcome with excitement. Leaning forward, she touched it with her mandibles, testing the thickness of the scales and coating the appendages with the dead dinosaur's blood. As soon as she had credible proof of the dead or injured beast, she abandoned her patrol route, rushing back towards the colony.

She hurried through the undergrowth, traversing tiny paths of scent unnoticeable to the world of larger creatures around them. A fresh carcass was a boon, and it had to be taken advantage of before the large, shuffling monsters realised it was there and arrived to feast on her brethren.

The colony boiled over with excitement as soon as it sensed her return. Amyr rushed from the burrows to taste the blood, and the immediate area was a cacophony of scent and taste, muddled and confusing. This state only lasted briefly, as the campaign leaders forced their way through the mass to verify that she had indeed located a source of food.

It took barely seconds for the amyr campaign leaders to organise things after that. As soon as their antennae brushed hers, orders were passed out and a campaign was organised, runners dashing off to a nearby neighbour colony.

An older amyr nudged her lightly with her antennae, and led her to the head of the still-forming platoon. Before she knew it, they were marching back towards the dead dinosaur.

To the human observer, this entire process would have taken less than five minutes.

It was difficult for her to resist leaping for joy. It was an honour to travel alongside these foragers, the gifted survivors of multiple campaigns, the powerful warriors that travelled from colony to colony and helped begin new ones.

They reached the clearing, and as one, stopped.

The yultaur crouched on the fallen dinosaur's back froze, staring at the platoon of insects in pure terror. Forgetting its meal, the possum scrambled up the side of the carcass, flinging itself towards the safety of the nearest tree.

Safety, of course, is a relative term.

The instant the possum's paws hit the trunk, the bark came alive with thousands of amyr, a second platoon waiting for the original to drive the furry creature towards them. Amyr swarmed up from the roots and dropped down from the branches, joining their fellows in sinking their fangs into the possum's flesh. The yultaur screeched, falling heavily to the ground.

Hold, came the order for the first platoon.

The main body of the second platoon swarmed over the yultaur then, covering its body in a thick carpet of writhing warriors. The yultaur screeched a final time, ceasing its struggles as the amyr completely overwhelmed it.

The young amyr shivered impatiently, gazing out at the second platoon and the dying yultaur. She could feel the other amyr massing behind them, forming neat lines of eager, hungry foragers.

Advance, the order came, and the young amyr had to fight her instincts to charge straight in, restricting herself to a steady march.

Almost there! And the amyr began to speed up, excitement overruling discipline.

Up and over-- leave room for your abdomens, came the next order, and then they were scrambling up the side of the carcass, advancing in short leaps where the angle became too steep.

Shortly after that, everything dissolved into chaos, as fangs sank into flesh, tearing tiny pieces away.

Book V Chapter 22: Journey Through Ages

The wind whipped Bast's hair around his face, sea-salt air fresh and sharp as he drew in a deep, indulgent breath.

He leaned against the rail, delighting in the sensation of the warm sun against his skin, the sound of the waves lapping gently against the hull, and the crew's footfall as they tended to the ship and their duties.

Seabirds floated through the air beside *the Rainbolg*, wings spread wide to drift on the winds, their shrill cries ringing out in unison. Nearby, a swan swooped down out of the clouds to join them. The sight of the bird so far out of its element gave Bast momentary pause-- but then he thought of home, and his suspicion was instantly forgotten.

His last trip to Aensdoun had been several months ago, and he had taken Sasha's anxiety away with him along with his long-kept secrets. Sasha was there in Aensdoun, waiting for him-- but so too was the second crystal, the mysterious artifact older than the Fatis Mirajin itself.

The crystal that he *still* had not mentioned to Nef.

It wasn't that he didn't intend to; he simply dreaded the conversation, fearing what reaction it might provoke-- he had from the moment Sasha had shown it to him.

The conversation had been put off for far too long, and Nef was certain to have it out with him if he were to say anything now.

Sasha told you about it? You've been home for months, and you're only telling me now?

With a weary sigh, Bast flopped his arms and head over the rail.

The birds had gone away while he was lost within his thoughts, the sound of waves fading into nothing. The ship slid out of the ocean with a low rumble, cutting through solid earth before skidding to a stop within a deep forest of titanic ancient trees.

The crew set to work docking the ship, and Bast quietly made his way down the platform, raising a hand to softly pat the bloodhawk that alighted upon his shoulder, claws like tiny hooks against his skin.

He wandered through the forest alone, following a well-traveled dirt path into a village teeming with people who stopped to smile at him as he passed by.
Musicians marched in a little group down the street, singing and playing their instruments as they went. Kelan was in their midst, playing his fiddle with such speed and skill that his hands seemed to blur.

Bast leaned against a nearby wall as they tromped closer, feet stomping out a steady rhythm in time. Kelan caught sight of him and slipped away from the group, continuing to play even as he approached, a wide grin on his face.

They had met for the first time in the unlikeliest of places-- preparing to attack a nearby rival tribe. War seemed an eventual inevitability of Anshe life, but it was one the two elves had little love for when there were songs to be crafted and wines in need of drinking.

Bast had been enchanted by Kelan's overblown tales of heroism and fame-- the boy was held in high regard by the entirety of the Trior alliance, and milked his status for every drop of its worth-- and decided to tag along with him after their service was over, whether he liked it or not.

Luckily, the two Speakers became fast friends.
Kelan was just a tiny bit full of himself, sure, but he always shared the spoils, so what did Bast care?

As Kelan came to a stop before Bast, an odd, shadowy creature with wings like stars crept past behind him; he almost commented on it, but decided it wasn't worth his attention after all.

"What's going on today? Anything good?"

"Meh, not *really*," Kelan drawled. "They wanted me to come out and play music for the village, so I've been running around for a while. My feet are starting to hurt, though, so... come back into the woods with me? They probably haven't noticed I'm gone yet, so we can still get away. *Come on!*"

Casually abandoning his instrument upon the dusty ground, Kelan grabbed Bast by the arm and tugged him away into the dense trees just behind the village.
The two elves ran over the plush carpet of moss lining the forest floor, laughing as their approach startled thousands of tiny, colorful birds into the air around them.

The forest was cool, lush, and free of the voices and expectations of men. They found their favorite spot-- a small clearing by a fallen great oak tree (what had toppled the great behemoth, no one knew)-- and settled upon the ground to smoke their hookah and share tales of their deeds and conquests of the past week.

Soon, they were laughing so hard they wept, far too entertained at themselves and dimly aware of things just beyond the trees watching them intently.

"There are faeries out there," Bast insisted, drunkenly shaking Kelan's shoulder and pointing. "I mean, not faeries like us. Like... faeries. *With wings*. I *saw one!*"

Kelan shook his head, picking up his wineskin and shaking it. "Ugh, you drank all of it. *That's* why you're seeing faeries. Next time, I'll get two."

Bast perked up. "You're the best, Kelan."

"Yeah, aren't I just?"

One of the odd black creatures walked past, paying no mind to Bastion as he stared quietly.
"Look. Look, *there!*" he breathed.

"What?"

"Didn't you-- oh, *nevermind.*"

"Yeah. Definitely more wine next time-- I wanna see what you're on about."

Shaking his head, Bast got to his feet to follow it away.
The thing didn't seem to notice, apparently preoccupied with other matters; it strode deeper into the forest, its butterfly-like wings fluttering behind it as it went, long, thin hands seeming to weave invisible patterns into the air.

"Hello?" Bast said-- but the creature seemed to blink out of existence as though it had never been.

"Wait! Come back, I only wanted to--"

"*What have I told you about coming out this far alone?*" a sharp voice scolded from within a nearby bush.

"But I'm not alone," Bast began. "Kelan came with me, and, well, I left him at the little campsite, but there was just a black thing--"
Meekly, he watched as an alligator skull rose from the leaves, two green eyes peering out at him from underneath.

"This is precisely why, you see? It could've been anything," Nefirian said. "Basilisks, wolves, leupaks...You remember what happened *last time*."

"Lewha--*oh*."

Bast wasn't entirely certain what Nef had done when the leupaks first appeared-- he had been droning on at length about some test Dilndrou wanted him to do with a crystal or something, and then things started to get weird.

The last time the Hairtlonn elf had come out to see him, he was greeted by an enormous thing that looked like a cross between the worst parts of an alligator, a lion, and a grazing dinosaur charging into the brush in a rampage-- followed by Nef himself, dripping with blood and hysterical.

Bast had joked with him at first, figuring the murkshaman had been killing small animals for ritual again.
After the shaman revealed that it was his own blood, and then insisted he *not* run back to the village for help, he hadn't known what to do other than tend to him the best he could and keep watch to make sure he *wasn't going to*...

"I remember," Bast murmured. "Is everything alright now?"

Nefirian suddenly seemed to crouch lower in the bush as though hiding something, glancing warily over his shoulder.
"...considerably," he said softly. "There are a few things that need to be taken care of before I can take my work to Dilndrou. Just... don't mention it to him, please. I don't want him to think I've been having trouble completing my task."

Bast frowned, noting the uncharacteristic meekness in his friend's voice.
Mod'han Nefirian was as close to an exile as any member of the Aen'och Trior had ever come.

Having been marked for death at birth and saved only at the whim of the alligator god of the Mod'han, he lived a lonesome and unhappy life, forever wary of the people who were just as suspicious as him.
Aggression had become his way of life, necessary for his own survival, and it was a rare moment when he seemed vulnerable, even after his rivalry with Kelan somehow transformed into a friendship between the three Aeneski-- much to the great displeasure of their respective tribes.

"I don't think Dilndrou is going to hurt you, Nef. He's looked out for you for this long..."

"If Dilndrou learns what's happened to my stone, and... and to me, he'll be convinced I really *am* cursed. If the villagers do, he *won't* be able to stop them this time, Bast."

"Why, what's wrong? Why won't you come out?"

"I'll explain later," the shaman said briskly before disappearing into the the brush, leaving Bast alone in the forest again despite his warning.

Bast continued down the forest paths, his eyes wide open for any sign of his friends or the strange, dark entities that seemed to flit by just as he turned his head.
The wood was alive with sound and color, and Bast was certain he could hear the rumbling of bears nearby.

His bears.

His wariness forgotten, the blonde elf broke into a sprint, dashing around the thick trees and into a grove bathed in sunlight, full of thick, green grass and speckled with tiny blossoms.
This was the home of the Hairtlonn tribe's sacred bears, with dens spread throughout the extent of the Sacred Grove.
Respectfully, Bast approached the beasts in silence-- and once the formality of it all became too much to stand, he ran forward to embrace them one by one, his affection returned in kind by nudging muzzles and strong paws.

Perfectly content, the elf flopped lazily into the grass with a great yawn, only to find the bear-god staring wordlessly down at him, one ear twitching slightly as a bird settled upon it.

To the elves of the Aen'och Trior, Sasha was a dour and humorless god with little patience for idle chatter or ritual. Unlike Aqk, who made her home in the trees just above the main village and lived in close proximity to her people, Sasha's grove was distant, well-secluded and difficult to find without the assistance of the Hairtlonn Speakers.
Unlike Dilndrou, who spent his waking hours training the people in the ways of alchemy and magic, Sasha had only a few dedicated Anshe who chose to serve him.
His people were guardians of the land and its secrets, sworn to preserve the Trior lands and the creatures and secrets to be found within them-- and the Sacred Grove itself was the most precious of all.

But Bastion had served the god for as long as he could remember, and Sasha rewarded his loyal followers with the same devotion and care that had been shown him, though no outsider would ever know it to look at him.

"The winds are changing, Honey-hair," he said gruffly. "More now than ever, I can feel as much."

"Sorry," Bast said sheepishly, and the bear rose an questioning eyebrow.

"I'd like to forget my charge and leave this place. It has been far too long, and I wonder if my presence truly makes any difference now."

Bast's eyes grew as large as plates. "Sasha, you don't have to stay here if you don't want to. You could come and live with us in Chimre, and just leave the big crystal here. No one ever comes to Aensdoun anymore, right? I bet it'd be perfectly safe!"

"I am not so certain. I cannot ride in your little vessel, and I do not have magic like Dilndrou, or wings like Aqk. And I am not content to stay here so close to the Eye. Good riddance to it, if I am not involved."

Bast frowned a bit.
Sasha had been guarding the Sacred Grove since he was first made, and according to his own words, it was what he was meant to do. That must've meant that the Eye was important to someone, somewhere-- and if it was like the Mirajin, there was no telling what it might've been capable of.

Could it really protect itself if it was left alone-- and if Sasha left, would something come after him for it?

Bast whipped his head up just in time to see one of the black winged creatures slip away behind Sasha.
"I think maybe Nef could help. Or even Dilndrou, but I don't want to talk to him," Bast admitted. "You could become a person and live with us, even!"

"Mmmm," Sasha said. "I will... consider it."

Bast opened his mouth to plead with the great bear just as a dark shadow fell upon the grove, prompting Sasha to stand up, his teeth bared.
"What is it?" Bast cried, rising from his spot in the grass to turn and face an enormous, tawny-furred beast with eyes as dark as night.

"No!" Sasha bellowed in shock, rising up on his hind legs. "It cannot be you!!"

Suddenly, wolves of every color seemed to flood the grove, claws and fangs snapping and tearing into everything in their path.

Horrified, Bast threw himself against Sasha's chest and screamed...

"Bast. Bast, *wake up!*"

The Cathedral of a Thousand Roses
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Bast's eyes fluttered open; he gasped and looked away for a moment as Nefirian took him in his arms. "It's alright, you were just asleep. *Voghn*, huh? What brought *that* on?"

"I... I dunno," Bast mumbled.

"I was thinking about Sasha when I fell asleep, I guess."

The redheaded scientist gazed down at his husband, curled up within a heap of blankets and pillows upon the middle of the loungeroom floor; he'd decided he was too tired to bother going to bed, no doubt.
"It's no wonder you were having nightmares-- I don't know how you can sleep like this. It must be horrendously uncomfortable."

Bast didn't argue, instead letting Nef fuss over him while he shooed the last of his errant thoughts.
He'd seen into his dreams when he came to wake him; of course he had. How much had he seen-- had he heard the conversation about the Eye of Elysia in the meantime?

Did he hear him thinking now?

"Hey, *hey*. Don't let it get you down, okay? Breakfast is on-- I figured you'd want me to cook before I left to start sending out invitations and making arrangements for the Ball this year."

Bast sprung from the makeshift bed before Nef could say another word.
"BREAKFAST!"

"I thought so," Nef said, grinning wryly as the blonde sprinted from the room.
Shaking his head, he strode over to a nearby window, gazing out at the Ranpa at work on the distant mountains, and the faint glimmer of violet over the fallen rocks below.

Satisfied with what he saw, he made his way towards the kitchen to scold Bast for digging the apples out of the fresh crumble cooling on the countertop.

Book V Chapter 23: Chew Toy

Heaven's Pillar Forest,Aensdoun

"I know what you are. I *know!*" Gabe's words echoed through the silent forest, ringing off of the ancient trees and back into his ears. Gabe sighed, getting to his feet to admire the starry night sky.
It was then that he heard the growl. He froze instantly, ice shooting through his veins and down his spine.

"No. No no *no no no no no*--"

Everything was going to start making sense again after tonight. He was going to go home, and demand that the Organization tell him everything he needed to know-- demand all their files on "*psychic beacons*" and find out what it really meant, and if he could force them to do things on his terms in exchange for his compliance.

He was going to get a nice house out in the middle of nowhere, away from all this crazy shit that wanted to eat him, and maybe enough money to shut Hans up for good, one way or another (*though in hindsight, that had sounded far more sinister than he'd intended it*).

He'd faced dinosaurs and crazy bastard ants and, for the Dreamwaker's sake, a *dragon* and lived. He was going *home*.

But *maybe he wasn't*, after all.
Perhaps now that he had finally gotten a lead on what was going on with him... it was finally time to be torn to pieces and strewn across the landscape.

His heart in his throat, Gabriel slowly turned around to find himself face to face with the most enormous white worg he had ever seen, hulking in the pale, cold moonlight and staring him down with eyes as clean and blue as a frozen lake.
It had an enormous, thick ruff of fur that ringed its head and shoulders, making it seem even more likely to swallow him whole.

Its teeth were bared and glistening, long ears pressed back against its head, and its eyes were locked on him.

"Go on, then," he whispered, near-tears. "Just go on and get it over with, already..."

And with a furious snarl, it leapt upon him at once, knocking him onto his back and crushing him into the earth. He shut his eyes tightly, the beast's breath hot against his throat, its long claws pressing like knives through his clothes and against his skin.
Gabe trembled beneath it, making no effort to escape, no desperate struggle to free himself. This time, there was no one to save him in the last moment-- he felt the wolf pressing harder down upon him, no doubt preparing to tear him open...

But instead, it snarled, swatting his cheek lightly with a paw. Confused, Gabe opened his eyes, staring at the thing a second time.

Its ears were far too long; its paws more like *hands*, albeit misshapen, clawed ones, and it stared down at him with an intelligence common beasts did not possess.
Lifting its head, it pulled aside a handful of its thick mane, revealing an odd metal collar hidden beneath its neck, a message of some sort printed upon it.

Property of the Silent Rose Organization

Gabe's eyes grew wide, and the varworg rose to its feet, but not before snarling ferociously at him, then glancing pointedly up at the moon.

Well, he'd just said he knew, hadn't he?

"... but why haven't you killed me?" Gabe asked quietly, more than a little unsettled at his friend's new guise.

Na'than wordlessly tapped the metal collar again with a grunt, and the Bio Doc blinked.

In every account and legend ever recorded, varworgn were dangerously manic beasts, incapable of stopping themselves from mauling and devouring any living creature who crossed their paths once the curse had taken hold.
No one was certain why, but the change seemed to almost suppress the souls of people who suffered from it.
Na'than had not only resisted any apparent desire to murder him, but seemed lucid enough to communicate thanks to the odd collar.
Gabe wondered if such a device might've kept Eva from rampaging through Headquarters the night she turned.

He wondered if she was alright, wherever she was, whatever Anom had been putting her through.

But a sudden, powerful shove jarred him out of his thoughts; Na'than gestured forcefully towards the camp, before pushing him a second time.

"... I know. Listen, Na'th... I'm sorry I--"

The werewolf growled, eyes flashing.

"Nevermind, *I'm going!* ... but let's talk later, alright?"

As Gabe turned to go, Na'than sat down in the soft grass and nodded slightly at him.

Wrapping his arms around himself to suppress another shudder, the scientist wondered dimly if the Organization was capable of wiping someone's memory, and what price they would demand for such a delightful procedure.

Book V Chapter 24: A Little More Light

The Cathedral of a Thousand Roses
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

The more he heard it and thought about it, the less Ecleco thought the thunderous booms that frequently shook the Cathedral and the surrounding areas had anything to do with weather, mirajin-affected or otherwise.

It was too short, too frequent-- too *solid*.
It sounded like falling rocks, in all honesty, and from the moment he thought of it he was all but certain.

Furrowing his brow, he made his way into the back gardens, flashing Gardenio a brief greeting smile as he passed by, eager to find the source of the noise and put a name to the source at last.

Walking briskly down the thin trail cut through the crystalforest just behind the Cathedral, Ecleco listened carefully as the racket continued, growing steadily louder and more reverberant.

If he continued straight ahead, he would eventually find himself at the Mimorre Ridge-- the enormous red mountains that marked the border between Chimre and ancient Mimore, which had been uninhabited for thousands of years.

But as he walked, movement from above caught his eye.

Pausing for a moment, Ecleco lifted his head to watch a winged humanoid flutter gracefully out into the air above him, an enormous bow held firmly in its hands.
It hovered overhead, seeming to watch him carefully as a second and third appeared just moments afterward.

These were the *Iicarn*-- legendary, elite servants of the Rose, rarely seen or heard of in anything beyond old storybooks or tales told to children.

A flock of the creatures soon flew in slow circles above him, all watching, waiting patiently to see what Ecleco would do, wielding golden bows and spears that glinted in the brillant sunlight along with their white wings and white masks.

Eight, nine, ten; one by one, the flock increased in size, each new creature immediately gazing down upon Ecleco with their blank masks, some plain and smooth, others in the shapes of creatures or decorated with swirling flourishes and graceful designs.

Not one had uttered a word, not to their fellows or to him, but their meaning was perfectly clear.

Leave, or be removed.

Turning to go, Ecleco sucked his teeth softly, listening to the steady wingbeats as the iicarn hovered nearby, watching, waiting.

He knew that the only thing that had saved him was his status as a member of the Court, but there was little point in pressing forward and risking retribution now; even having been turned away, he had found what he was looking for.

The Silent Rose was up to something-- *something they were willing to kill a Courtesan to hide.*

Ecleco slipped back through the gardens, heading through Cathedral's back door and down the spiraling path towards the Mirajin Chamber

and the Greatmother, forcing his anxiety away as he walked; he would have plenty of time to discuss this with Marquise later.

It would hardly improve her mood, after all.

Below, Opus slept wrapped neatly around the base of the Fatis Mirajin, the enormous crystal seeming to chime musically as he approached, as though it was welcoming him back.

A second Courtesan sat nearby, drowsily rubbing her eyes as she got to her feet, and offering Ecleco a lazy smile as her eyes fell upon him. It was customary for two Erosions to remain in the Chamber at once, alternating between sleep with the Greatmother; her turn was over, for now.

Climbing over the black dragon's thick, scaly tail, Ecleco settled down upon the pile of cushions at her feet, leaning his head against her chest. Opus's breathing was deep and steady as she slept, paws neatly tucked beneath her, her neck arched gracefully across the floor.

As Ecleco made himself comfortable, he absently wondered if Kelan's son had lain in this very position, that day he arrived without announcement or warning at the Cathedral gates seeking to visit his-- *their* mother.

He wondered about the nature of the Fatis Mirajin, and why it was that sleeping beside it had driven the Flarion mad, while Ecleco and his brothers and sisters could come and live there for months unharmed.

Had it brought him peace of mind and happiness to lie down beside his mother, as it did for the Erosions? Were his anxieties and worries smoothed away into nothing, too?

If all of Opus's children enjoyed the same warmth and love from simply joining her in rest for a little while, he could hardly blame Valdren for having risked everything to see her again.

Ecleco couldn't imagine having lived for so long without being allowed near her.

His thoughts wandered, ebbing and flowing like an ocean lapping slowly at his consciousness before he finally fell asleep, tucked just beneath the Greatmother's snout.

The entire world spread out before him like a great tapestry, tall, lush grasses and jewel-vivid skies as far as he could see. He knew he could go anywhere at a thought-- but his destination was uncertain.

"Greatmother?"

Ecleco felt her soothing warmth within his heart, but he wasn't certain where she was, only that she had heard him and was waiting. For now, it was enough; gathering his wits about him, he began his journey.

He walked for an eternity, grasses turning to smooth, golden sands beneath his feet as dunes cut graceful silhouettes into the violet sky overhead. Something bubbled beneath the sand a few yards away; he broke into a run, spying an oasis just ahead.

The thing followed, huge, hooked claws breaching the surface and reaching out to grasp at him. He could hear the bubbling oasis waters just ahead, beckoning him closer.

Just a little more, and he'd be safe, free.
But the sand-beast grabbed his leg just before he could throw himself into the soft desert grasses, and pulled him down and under as he cried

out.

Ecleco tumbled head over heels down a great, black tunnel, wind whipping past his ears as he fell.
He hit bottom, bouncing once before landing in a heap upon a silken pillow easily twice his size.

Momentarily stunned, he sat slowly upright to take in his surroundings.

Somehow, he had fallen through the desert and into an enormous underground passage, built of cut brick and tiles instead of carved stone. The tiles were well-polished and glossy, forming scenes of landscapes, creatures interacting, and places that seemed dimly familiar, but he couldn't quite place.

The area was lit by small braziers that hung from the walls and sat upon the floor, some with sticks and cones of incense burning within them-- the smell was deep and spicy, and tickled Ecleco's nose.

Looking up, one of the shadowy creatures he had seen in the Cathedral walked slowly toward him, its glowing eyes seeming to brighten as it folded its arms across its chest, wings fluttering slowly.

"It's you again. Who-- *what* are you?"

It giggled, choosing a nearby pillow to sit on before him.
"I? I am lumynos," it buzzed. "You see us, but you're not one of the *Brilliant One's* folk, nor did you cross through an aetherhole. Who are *you?"*

Ecleco raised an eyebrow. *Brilliant One?*
But it had asked a question of its own, so it was only fair to respond in kind.

"I'm a member of The Court-- just passing through, really. But I've never heard of a lumynos before. Is that your name, or...?"

"No, no. It is what I am." The creature spread its starry wings, hovering just above the well-polished floor for a moment. "We live here-- in Reverie, that is-- and oversee everything. We fix glitches in dreams, make sure everything is properly contained, and prevent voidrifts from opening and causing trouble.
"We're always here, but most outsiders can't focus on us while they dream."

"I see," Ecleco murmured. "Fix glitches? Does that mean you can close aetherholes? And what's a *voidrift?*"

The lumynos paused. "It's in our power to do so, yes," it said carefully. "We usually choose not to, however. We only interfere with potential dangers to Reverie itself; nothing that comes out of an aetherhole could threaten our realm, but voidrifts... dangerous things can come out of them. Dreamers can fall into them and be lost.
"And other things, but I'm not at liberty to discuss them with outsiders. You understand," it buzzed, tilting its head.

"Oh, yes. Of course," Ecleco reassured it. "So you're dream custodians. But I've seen another of you before, in the waking world. Is that usual?"

The lumynos fidgeted, glancing over its shoulder with an uncomfortable buzz.
"Sometimes as we work, we may blunder into aetherholes," it said slowly, glancing away from the Courtesan as it spoke. "It happens on occasion; it's nothing to worry about."

But before Ecleco could ask it to elaborate, the creature abruptly scampered away into the darkness of the tunnel on its awkward, birdlike feet.

Something he had said had clearly upset it; he made a note to take more care the next time he had a chance to speak with one.

Getting to his feet, Ecleco headed deeper into the tunnels, sighing softly as a sensation of inviting warmth washed over him.

Eager, he broke into a sprint, passing through an archway before finally entering a huge, circular room, covered in soft pillows and vivid velvet drapes.

Thousands of little fluffballs hopped around the room, wriggling in between the pillows and sheets and playing with their fellows, chirping excitedly.

Two of the chicklets toddled up to greet Ecleco, their big eyes sparkling in the low light. He knelt to scoop them up, breaking into a gentle smile as a dark shape in the back of the room lowered its head to regard him fondly.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it, Greatmother?"

"Mmmhmm! I missed you!" Opus trumpeted, immediately reaching out to scoop Ecleco up in her paws and hold him close as the chicklets swarmed around them. "It's okay, though. You can be happy now!"

Book V Chapter 25: Invited Again!

Gier, South Dreamsong

Kelan stepped out of the bathroom, towel wrapped firmly around him as he walked carefully down the hall.
A loud, repetitive chirping sounded from a nearby room, and he smiled faintly; Wren was up to something, no doubt.

Peeking around the wall, he saw the little blue harpy sitting next to a pile of assorted masks, trying them on one after the other.
Unimpressed with the current mask, he shook his head and plucked it off, tossing it aside for another. No good; he shook his head again with a chirp before removing it.

Kelan watched the spectacle quietly, holding back a laugh.
Wren was a fantastic little creature, especially for a harpy; in Aensdoun, they had been servants of Cauakaa, the Jay goddess, and while she was not one to start wars like the other beast gods outside of the Trior allegiance, her harpies often shared hunting grounds with his people.

His people were usually the prey, in fact.

Although Kelan had seen Wren pull apart meals with his sharp talons as he ate, he could hardly imagine the friendly little bird eviscerating someone.

Wren sighed loudly, tossing the next mask aside before holding another up to his face. His disappointment only increased; dropping it, he rummaged dejectedly through the pile.

"...what in the... That looks nothing like me!" Kelan protested. "And *why stars?!*"

It was then that Kelan noticed a sheet of loose paper resting atop the nearby desk, decorated with gaudy lettering and a familiar symbol; curious, he made his way around Wren to read through it.

Ladies and Gentlemen
The Legendary Doctor's Ball is Coming
and YOU are invited!

"The Doctor's Ball?" Kelan rose an eyebrow, cautiously picking up the flyer between his thumb and forefinger as though it was hazardous.

"Yes-- I attend every year. I do hope it's no problem," Selarion said, stepping out of his office in his usual attire.

Kelan skimmed the rest of the flyer."No, of course not. In fact... hmm."

"Yes?"

The Flamekeeper folded the flyer neatly into four quarters, turning on his heel. "Give me an hour to run down to the shops; I'll be back."

Book V Chapter 26: Have a Ball!

Laps-du-Ment Grande Ballroom
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

The massive redwood doors swung open as the crowd arrived, carriages, horses, and carts carrying partygoers, exhibits and food to the front gates.

Costumes of all shapes, sizes, and colors lined up to get inside, heads lifted in wonder to take in the sights and sounds of the Grande Ballroom in all its majesty.
Voices rose to a dull roar, engaged in excited chatter about the surprises and pleasures sure to come.

And on the far end of the opulent room stood a pair of Aeneski, watching the crowds arrive with a great deal of interest.

"I hope the prrbs will be alright back home. They always get nervous when we're both gone at the same time," Bast sighed.

"Try not to worry too much about them. They're big bears, they can take care of themselves."

"I don't know. The other day I went to go find food for two minutes-- because you weren't home," Bast explained with a sniff, "and when I came back, one had gotten her head stuck in a bucket."

Nefirian frowned. "Try not to worry too much about them."

Across the floor, Didier gracefully walked out to his piano, bowing amidst excited applause and cheers before settling in to play a haunting waltz; people shuffled out in pairs to dance in time.

"What do you think Selarion will wear this year?"

"Oh, don't you *even*. You know he always comes as "a gentleman". Ugh. You shouldn't let him in," Bast grumbled. "Even I worked hard on my costume this year!"

"And you did a fantastic job, at that," Nef said, folding his arms across his bare chest. "Well, up until the hair dye. I don't know *what* happened, there."

"It was taking too long. My arms got tired, alright?"

"Uh-huh, *suuure*."

Turning to face the crowd, Nefirian cleared his throat, raising a wine glass as the waltz continued.

"Hello, everyone! Welcome to this year's Doctor's Ball, here in beautiful Laps!
"This year, we have a very special treat for you, in addition to the delightful food and free gifts from our resident scientists, alchemists, and engineers. We've asked several good friends of the Silent Rose Organization to design leupaks for us-- if you visit their booths around the ballroom, you can have a look for yourselves, meet them, and maybe even take home a quaggy or two.

"If you have a fondness for leupaks-- and really, if you don't, the Firestarters' convention is down the hall-- why not check it out? Please be reasonable, however; check back with our vendors and displays every hour or so, as they'll need plenty of time to replenish their stock!"

Pausing to take a sip of his wine, he smiled proudly.

"And of course, a Ball wouldn't be a Ball without music; we're very honored to have Chimre's very own-- and of course, *Glass Marionette's* own, but we don't like to share-- Didier Dimitri Joan-Mont providing live entertainment this year! Don't forget to go out on the dance floor with your friends, and maybe make some new ones!

"We hope you enjoy our Ball this year; the party will be going on for about the next week, or until I get sick of the lot of you.

"Go on, then! Get!"

Book V Chapter 27: Chapters in Motion

Laps-du-Ment Grande Ballroom
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

"Quite the turnout this year, isn't it? I think this is the biggest ball we've ever had," Nefirian said, sipping casually at his wine as he leaned against the banister.

"The biggest what?" Bastion gasped in shock, his eyebrows rising high.

Nef only shook his head. "So many good costumes, too. That guy over there is obviously a gargoyle. Check it out, he's got little vines trailing after him and everything."

The two chapters watched the dancers and partygoers with eager eyes, their feet stepping in time to the lively waltzes Didier hammered out on his piano.

A lithe fellow in a suit with metallic skin made his way across the ballroom floor, coming to a stop just before the balcony staircase and peering up curiously.

"Oh, hullo. Amazing costume-- you're an automaton, ri..." Nefirian's voice suddenly trailed off as Bast peered out over his shoulder. "*ELLIOT!!* Elliot, you're *here! At MY ball!"* he squealed with delight, coaxing a snicker from his husband.

"Beep beep. Hello, Doctor Bloodhawk. I'm sorry I didn't make it last year; Id've risked being devoured by ghouls if I had left my office," she said, smiling warmly beneath her metal mask.

Nef and Bast exchanged glances.

"But *I'm*-- oh. *Ohhhh,*" Bast said, tapping his monocle.

Nef bowed with a flourish, grinning from ear to ear. "Tell me-- has technology in Gier advanced to such a point that their automatons can dance?"

"Beep boop, verifying proposition," Elliot said in her best robot voice.

"Confirmed," Nef laughed.

"Proposition accepted. Dance routine beta test initiated, boop beep beep."

Leaning over to peck Bast on the cheek, Nefirian led Elliot out to the ballroom floor.

"Will Ba--..*Nefirian* mind?"

"Oh, goodness, *no.* He'll be making the rounds himself, I'm sure-- I saw him eyeing someone up not two moments ago. Well, we might've been doing it together," he admitted. "That's no matter, though. Shall we, my little robot?"

"Beep boop, affirmative."

Hand in hand, they began to waltz across the ballroom floor, feet stepping in perfect time. Glancing up into Elliot's eyes, Nefirian caught her looking down a little too far; she squeaked, her cheeks flushing a soft pink.

"Ah, Elliot?" He murmured, grinning sheepishly.

"Oh! Oh, Doctor Bloodhawk, I'm sorry," Elliot gasped, embarassed. "It's difficult not to-- I'm so sorry. It's horribly inappropriate, isn't it?"

"No, no! It's alright. It is sort of, erm... *right there*, after all."

"It is," she admitted. "I'm afraid I can't help myself. It is rather..."

"*Big?*" Nef finished, stifling a laugh.

"Er... *yes.* I'm *so sorry*, I hope I haven't offended you--"

"Of course not," he said. "You can't let these things bother you, I've found. Why, everyone's going to stare and gossip anyway... and if I'm *perfectly* honest, that's half the fun," he grinned.

Gathering her nerve, Elliot let go of Nefirian's hand and prodded his belly.

"Sorry! It was kind of a once in a lifetime chance," Elliot explained with a grin.

"Well, then! Now that that's been established," he laughed aloud, "the dance appears to be over."

"Pity," she sighed. "It's a rare day when I get to enjoy myself, anymore."

"Now, now. I'm absolutely flattered to be the highlight of your day, even sans-shirt, but the dance is over, not the *Ball*. Promise you're not going to run along home now?"

"Oh, no. Not yet, anyway. But, Nefirian-- I suppose I should ask you something, since we're face to face for once."

"That's only fair; I'm always asking you in dreams. This is *your* ground, if we're perfectly honest. What is it?"

Elliot sighed. "A few weeks ago, I discovered Cazwell had secretly made an appointment at a Firm here in Laps for a surgical sculpting back into a human. I only just managed to stop the procedure before it began. Do you know anything about that?"

"...you mean to say that he didn't have permission to book that procedure? With family money?" he whispered. "Elliot, Swanheart is the only Cosmo Firm in Laps, and I direct it personally. Being as though you're the primary owner of the Christoph accounts, I can get you the paperwork surrounding that case and a full refund for everything but the processing fees. I'm--"

"I'm not concerned about the money, not really," she insisted, "but Caz has been getting more and more desperate about his... condition."

She wondered if referring to being a leupak as a *condition* wasn't somewhat insensitive.

"I'm terrified that I'll look up one day and he'll have gone to some greater extreme... and there isn't much more room left for that, after attempting to go in for surgery. I know it's a stretch, but if you have any advice or anything you could possibly do to help..."

"I'm running a tight schedule lately," he murmured, "but... after the Ball is over, try and get a hold of him for me, alright? I'll make a house call."

"But you can't--"

"I'm the damned Dreamwaker, Elliot, and your brother needs help. What I *can't* do is sit idly by. Send me a lodica when you get home." Without warning, Nefirian pulled her into a tight hug and squeezed her hand. "Until then, you're not allowed to worry about it anymore. Now, go and enjoy yourself. And thank you for the lovely dance," he added with a hesitant smile as he turned to wander off into the crowd. "Beep beep."

"Beep beep," Elliot sighed, spying Selarion wandering into the ballroom not far away.
Nefirian made his way slowly through the great clusters of people laughing, dancing, and enjoying the festivities, shaking hands and complimenting costumes all the while.

Finally, he spied a curious stranger with long, silver hair in an ornate harpy mask and matching feathery blue shawl.

"That is an absolutely beautiful costume," Nef breathed. "Did you craft that yourself?"

"Thank you," the stranger replied, smiling ever so slightly beneath his mask. "As a matter of fact, I did."

But Nef's ear twitched; he squinted a bit. "Your voice is so familiar... have we met?"

"As a matter of fact," Kelan said, lifting his mask away from his face, "*we have*."

Book V Chapter 28: When Worlds Collide

Laps-du-Ment Grande Ballroom
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Everything around the two chapters seemed to freeze in time-- dancers slowing to a pause, music fading swiftly from their ears.
Every light in the ballroom shone down upon them like beacons, every eye seeming to see only them.

For a single, sacred moment, all was silent, all possibilities equal.

"I... *Kelan*," Nefirian breathed, the words falling heavy like stones.

"Hello, Nefirian," he said simply, as a tiny fairy wren flitted across his shoulders, making itself comfortable atop the feathered shawl.

"...we should, um. Go... *somewhere*," the scientist managed weakly, gesturing to a nearby empty alcove with a tip of his head.

This, he had not expected. Not remotely, not *minutely*.
Kelan did *not* come to Chimre; not to visit, not to talk, and most certainly not to a *Ball*. The implications were positively massive, but Nef steeled himself as he led Kelan over to the windowed passage.

They were in a public place, teeming with people; Kelan could not, absolutely *would not* attempt to kill him here.
But then... he *could* in theory, couldn't he?
He didn't need fire spells or world-shattering magic to destroy him. He didn't need to doom everyone in the building simply to snuff a single life.

He was, after all, *the Flamekeeper*.
If Kelan so wished it, all he had to do was find the thread, *and*...

They stopped just beneath one of the massive windows, soft moonlight falling upon them.

"You look terrible," Kelan said, catching him off-guard; he hadn't been expecting any amount of small talk, either.

Nef laughed weakly. "I *feel* ready to swallow my tongue, so that's only fair. I confess, I'm not certain whether I should be writing my will right now or not."

"What's going on here? The mirajin is overwhelming; these people haven't been living in this for long. Not even your dreamshards could suck up this miasma..."

Of course; he could sense it in the air.
Did he know what it felt like before the project began?

Damnit, Kelan; you *weren't supposed to be here*...
"You're likely closer to the Fatis Mirajin itself than you've been in hundreds of years, Kelan.
I'm certain you must be more sensitive to feeling its energy than those of us who carry out our lives around it," he said smoothly.

Kelan pursed his lips. "Ah, so I see. And where was this certainty when my son came to visit you? Do you know what's happened to me, Nefirian?"

"...no," he admitted, his mouth dry. "What's happened to you, Kelan? I haven't heard from you in more than a year. Not since we met in Dreams--"

"Shortly after that meeting, Valdren came back to Schalle along with the dragons who left with him. They burned Aenswynne down around my people. They burned the forests surrounding Aqk's Peak," Kelan said at a whisper.

"And when I found Valdren there atop the Peak, he killed Aqk before my very eyes, and then he *burned me alive."*

Nef simply stared at him in confused, wounded silence. "...no. He-- but... *but you're* ..."

Wordlessly, Kelan pulled his shawl aside, spreading his flame-feathered wings briefly before folding them away again.

"...*the legendary Fair sibe*," he finished, his eyes growing wide. "He killed both of you."

"Why have you done this to me, Nefirian?" Kelan demanded softly. "Why have you insisted in taking everything I've ever had, snatching it away, and distorting it? Turning it against me? *Destroying it?* Is your hatred for me truly so *complete?"*

"I am Nefirian *Dreamscar,* Kelan. Mod'han has been dead for a long time. I could never, would never wish you to suffer. Despite everything, you're one of my greatest friends...
"Everything I've created, everything I've ever done--"

"...has destroyed everything *I've* ever cherished," Kelan snarled. "My joy, my life, my people, my mortality... now my mentor? Now my *own son?* What else will you demand of me?
"What else will you tear away to *feed your fucking crystal?!"*

"*Stop it.* You're hurting, Kelan, I understand that, but *this*--"

"Understand?! How in hell could you *ever understand?* Oh, yes, you're certainly suffering here, aren't you, spewing your toxic radiation *bullshit* all over everything, dancing, revelling, gorging yourselves stupid and rolling around in your loathsome, world-devouring, pseudo-scientific *filth!*"

"My gods," Nefirian laughed despite himself. "You sound so much like I used to, Kelan. How could I *not* know such bitterness and hatred when I see it? I lived it! I lived *-this-!* Kelan, *please* listen to me. You need he--"

"I told you," he hissed. "I told you before all this happened, that if you hurt Valdren, there'd be hell to pay. And no, you didn't hurt him. You've *ruined* him, you've rotted his mind--"

"And what of the other Flarions, Kelan?" Nef suddenly snapped, narrowing his eyes and flattening his ears. "Did I rot their minds, too? Is the instability Valdren contracted from the Mirajin contagious, or were they simply waiting for an excuse to turn on you, raze everything to the ground and do things on *their terms?*
"Would you like to blame me for that, as well, or perhaps even the short temper, kneejerk reactions and poor judgement Valdren's had as long as I've ever known him?"

Kelan snarled. "Don't you *dare--"*

"No, *you listen*, you pompous arsehole!" Nefirian bellowed, his lips curled back, all the better to show off his sharp, fearsome teeth. "You may not like the way I run things, and you may find it easier to believe that the world is out to get you-- especially when you can conveniently

blame me for having something to do with it-- but you know what?
"*You make your own destiny*. I realized that finally as Mod'han Nefirian, that day when something changed in me and realized I didn't need to resent everything anymore. Now, for years, all you've ever done is make everyone around you miserable in my place. But you know what? I *get it*.
"I'm a horrible, loathsome, sorry excuse for an *Aeneski*, but that's alright, because I refuse to let other peoples' opinions of what I *aught* to be color my own, and I make damn sure everyone under my wing has that very same right.
"And I make damn sure they all know that I love and value them, so when the shit hits the fan? *They'll be there for me when I* need them!" His last words were a furious shriek, ringing painfully in their ears.

"That's all well and good," Kelan sneered, his voice low and his teeth clenched tight, "but we'll see where that gets you when everything crashes down around your ears, and the people you love, that you've spent your entire life loving, *are the very same ones driving the sword through your back!"*

"*ENOUGH!!* I have had *enough of this!* Terribly sorry your life is so shit, Kelan, but you don't really want my help *or* my sympathy, so *I'll be going now*. Now, doesn't *that* sound familiar?"

Nefirian saluted him mockingly, spinning on his heel and marching out into the crowd without another word, leaving Kelan bristling in his wake.

He strode furiously through the ballroom and past Selarion and Elliot, who were dancing together out on the floor.

"... was that Nefirian without a shirt on? Good heavens," Selarion said, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, it's not *that* bad," Elliot said with a giggle.

"No, not that. He didn't seem in a terribly good mood... oh, *Kelan*, you *didn't*..." Selarion sighed, watching as Kelan emerged from the alcove, scowling under his mask and folding his arms across his chest, his head bowed; on the opposite end of the room, Nefirian stalked away into another, dragging up a chair and throwing himself heavily atop it before pressing his face into his hands in obvious misery.

"Is something the matter?"

"I'm afraid so, it seems. But please, allow me to escort you back to your seat first," Selarion said with a bow, taking her hand and walking to a nearby table to pull out a chair for her. "Would you like something to drink before I go?"

"Oh, yes, please. Thank you so much, Selarion," Elliot said coyly, her cheeks flushing as she glanced away from him with a smile.

Shadows flitted past Nefirian as dancers wheeled and spun on the floor, enjoying themselves mightily.
He kept his head down and out of the light, determined that no one might see him there, his grief and confusion plain on his face.

He had never expected Kelan to show up at the ball; he had never expected Kelan to be *slain by his son and return from the dead.*

The stoic Chapter all but hated him now, that much was obvious; so close to fruition, his greatest achievement may have already been too late in coming.
Desperate to have soothed Kelan, or to at least to have tended his wounds, their discussion-- the first discussion since Valdren had come to see him, no less-- had quickly devolved into a shouting match.
Nothing, *no one* had gotten him to raise his voice in a *very long time*; it was a near-impossibility thanks to his mental discipline and iron will.

But his will had failed him; confronted with an angry and bitter Kelan out of the blue, the shock of the moment had caught hm off-guard, and

his swift and vicious attack had gotten through his defenses and under his skin.

As the only fully-powered, awakened Chapter, Kelan held a notable advantage over him in any face-to-face confrontation; there was likely little he could do if the Flamekeeper had decided to assault him, even on his own turf.

Little but flee into the Reverie and pray he left Laps and Chimre intact in the predictable rage that followed-- *how crushingly humiliating*.

He wondered if he had done the right thing in allowing Valdren to see Opus.
He wondered if the short-tempered, impulsive Flarion Prince wouldn't have killed Kelan and Aqk in the end, anyway.

Another shadow cut into the light of the brilliant ballroom; this one did not flicker past, however.

"Hey, you alright?"

Nefirian looked up, scowling; this voice was familiar as well, but much less so-- he couldn't quite place it, but he knew he'd met this man before.
Only his lips were visible within the snarling mouth of his emerald green dragon mask, and he smiled comfortingly down at the little Chapter.

"Completely," he lied, not bothering to smile back.
He felt naked now, and not remotely because of his uncharacteristically revealing costume; it seemed more effort than it was worth to bother feigning contentment, to bother concocting some minor and temporary concern when the nigh-impenetrable fortress he had built to conceal his emotions within had fallen.

Much to his displeasure, however, the costumed man helped himself to a chair, turning it to face Nef before sitting down, crossing one taloned leg over the other.
His costume was ridiculously ornate; it was the only full-face mask he had seen at the Ball tonight, accompanied by a padded, scaled green bodysuit covered in intricate designs and shimmering colors. The shoulders even branched off into a pair of small, clawed arms, a dragon wing-styled cape hanging down from them.

Despite himself, Nefirian found himself enchanted by the wondrous detail of it all, and he relaxed a bit.

"That has to be the most spectacular costume I've seen here yet," he announced, dimly aware that the last time he'd said such a thing, Kelan popped out; there certainly weren't two of him, however, and he couldn't make himself suspect that Valdren might be hiding within.
"It's a green rampant, isn't it?"

"Nope!" The stranger chirped proudly. "It's Orra, the Elysian god of Life!"

Nefirian's face turned to stone; ice ran down his spine.

This couldn't be Dilndrou; he would've already tried to kill him, and there was no way the ornery alligator would have taken the time to have a costume crafted just to sneak into the ball.

It wasn't Dietrich, either, as he kept his distance from the towns and cities of Chimre, and would know nothing of the traditions of their people.

He swallowed; it was not his day at all. "With absolutely all due respect... who are you, what do you know about Elysians, and why are you here?

"I'll answer backwards, is that okay? I'm here with a proposition for you, on the behalf of someone *very special.* I was quite intimate with the

Elysians for a very long time-- you could say they made me who I am today, in fact..."

The masked man grinned, setting a hand on Nefirian's shoulder. "And I saved your life not too long ago, too. I don't think I had a chance to properly introduce myself, though, what with the screaming, angry alligator-god trying to kill you-- you're a popular guy, huh? ...

"...so, you can call me *Nigel*."

Book V Chapter 29: Wide Awake

Laps-du-Ment Grande Ballroom
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Kelan felt everything alive around him, and piece by tiny piece, it whittled away at him. The ballroom was utterly teeming with people, and every heart beat in time with his own, every pulse echoing in his ears.

The joy and excitement of the celebration flowed through his being, along with tiny hints of uncertainty, of intimidation, of shyness; none of those emotions were his, but he observed them as they filtered through him.

He felt the earth, beneath the dead wood and stone floor he stood upon; it was slow and cool and crawling, saturated and ailing with poisons invisible to the eye, undetectable by touch or taste or smell.
He felt the tiny miracrystals scattered within it, growing slowly, as slowly as glass flows and as trees turn their leaves towards the sunlight, and he felt their alien energy seeping into the sick land, thick and inky and wretched.

He felt the Fatis Mirajin's energy most of all, like a wave of power coursing through everything here; oozing, soaking into the buildings and the plants and the earth and sky, the partygoers and Elliot and Selarion, dripping from the tiny silver threads of life he so often drew his fingers across.

He felt the energy curving around and away from himself, repelled by the vital shield his magic had created and sustained as if by some instinct of its own; he felt it drawing into [[Nefirian], as though he were a great hole sucking it all in, feeding from it, thriving on it.

And beneath all this, he felt another source, more faint than the Fatis Mirajin, but somehow more prevalent.

But before he could consider the implications of such a thing, before he could gather the nerve to confront Nefirian a second time, he felt Selarion approaching, his gentle, graceful steps falling into time with the beating of his old, noble heart.

"Kelan, what did you say...?"
He wrested his attention away from the thousands of supernatural stimuli vying for his attention, focusing with some effort on the sound of Selarion's voice and his own thoughts and emotions.

"I told him that I'd been murdered by my own son."

Selarion sighed, pressing his hand to his lips. "Confronting Nefirian like this isn't going to accomplish anything but to alienate the two of you further. I know it's difficult, but please, show some restraint."

"... I'm sorry, Selarion. I don't know why I thought this was a good idea, with my temper... but nothing I said to him was untrue."

"That only concerns me more," Selarion said with a little smile. "Why don't you come out to the floor with me, and try to enjoy yourself for a little while? The fellow on the piano is quite good."

"I'd love to, but I'm not certain I can. This place... all the feedback, the mirajin... it frightens me," Kelan admitted. "It frightens me for you, and for Professor Christoph, and for Valenth, itself.
"Chimre is desperately ill, and if this is allowed to spread..."

"You can't spend every waking moment saving the world," Selarion pleaded gently, taking his hand.

"No," Kelan sighed, watching over Selarion's shoulder as Nefirian spoke to a man in an ornate dragon costume. "I suppose I can't."

Book V Chapter 30: Very Special People

Laps-du-Ment Grande Ballroom
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

"Saved my li... you're the thing that saved me from Dilndrou," Nefirian said, the voice suddenly clicking in his head as the costumed man nodded excitedly, the ears of the dragon mask flapping in time.

"... that's not really your name, though, is it? Dilndrou called you Art--"

"Dilndrou is a *clod*," Nigel said firmly. "It's not very nice to call people names they don't go by any longer. That was from my beast-god days, and while they were full of adventure and good times, those days are over. You're totally down with that, though, aren't you? You've grown so much since your Mod'han days!"

Nef's head swam; was this thing *truly a beast-god?*
"How much do you know about me?" he asked, astonished.

"You were born Mod'han Nefirian of the Aen'och Trior, disowned by your birth parents and shunned by the entire tribe for your allegedly "unnatural" hair color, which earned you the nickname *Ban'leane*, "witch-child".
"You were due to be slain just before your fourteenth birthday, the day all Trior children were sent on their rite of passage into adulthood, but Dilndrou forbade the villagers from harming you, and took you in as an alchemical apprentice, *yadda yadda yadda*. Shall I go on?"

"... no, that's... that's enough... *Nigel*," he breathed, astonished. "So, you watched me grow up?"

"Nope. I watched all *three of you* grow up, from little faelings into the big, strapping immortals you are today."

"Right," Nef said, raising an eyebrow.

"But then, why didn't you kill us when we were mortal, or shortly after? Why let us thrive-- your tribe *can't* have been in on this. Even then, the Aen'och weren't terribly amicable people..."

"I never *had* a tribe of my own, for one," Nigel giggled. "And for two, it wasn't what I was there to do. It still isn't; I answer to a *higher authority*, and other than specific instances, I've been ordered to simply observe, rather than to interfere. We're on your side."

Nef sighed. "I hate to break it to you, but we don't have a side for you to be on. I'm here, Kelan's over there, and the rift's only getting *bigger*."

"Oh, psh. *Chira* doesn't care about all that nonsense. She knows that deep down, both of you still love each other."

"...*Chira?* What the hell does the moon have to do with this?" Nef snapped, his anger reignited. "Listen, if you want to mess with my head, *Nigel*, or *Artemio*, or whoever you are, you picked a really awful time to do it. I just want to go home and perform an amazingly true-to-life impression of an unhappy lump right now, not crazy talk with a bat in a dragon suit about the moon."

Getting to his feet, Nefirian turned to head back out into the ballroom--

-- and ran smack into Nigel, staggering for a moment in his confusion.

"Don't mock me, please," Nigel sighed. "It's not very nice, and I promise you're interested in what I have to say. There's a *reason* I saved you from Dilndrou."

"Oh, *is there?* By all means, do enlighten me. Does it have anything to do with deciding to kill me after all in a few hundred years? 'Cause, really, I'm a little tired of that approach already. No offense," Nef growled, turning to shuffle past him.

"*Rrrrighto.* Well, all aboard the enlightenment train," Nigel said, grabbing Nef roughly by the shoulder and pulling him backwards.

"Son of a-- *let GO of me!!"*

But somehow, between the odd man-bat-beast in a dragon suit, shuffling, and his indignant, irritated yell, Nefirian managed to fall-- or was he *thrown*, perhaps?-- backwards into a tumbling roll, landing in a sore and astonished heap against something cold, hard, and slightly damp.

He pressed his hand to his head and groaned loudly. "This is so completely *not* the way to win my favor, just so you... ?!"
One by one, he began to take note of sudden changes in his surroundings.

The floor, he had already noted, was cold, hard, and ever so slightly pockmarked; stone, not wood. The voices, laughter, and music of the Ball had vanished quite suddenly, as well as the blinding light of the mirashard-powered chandeliers.

On top of that, it was rather unpleasantly cold; cold ground, cold *air*...

Having had more than enough of this game, the little Chapter forced his eyes open, staring at the expansive gray stone temple that spread out all around him, gothic arches and dusty windows rising up as far as the eye could see.

A tiny spider skittered nonchalantly onto and over the back of his hand, and he frowned.

This was most certainly *not* anywhere in Chimre.

"Nigel?! What in the hell did you DO?!"

"Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry!" came Nigel's now nervous voice. "I couldn't think of any other way to get you to--"

Suddenly, Nefirian realized the odd creature wasn't actually speaking to him, not entirely.

"Artemio, that is quite enough. Please..."

"I'm sorry. *I'm so sorry.* You can convince him, though. I don't know what to--"

"Was today brought into existence *just* to test the limits of my patience?" Nef growled, rising at last to his feet and spinning on his heel. "Someone had better tell me, and *fast*, exactly what the fuck is going on, or I'm going to..."

His words died on his lips.

"Please forgive Artemio, Dreamwaker. Subtle interaction is far from one of his strongest points, but he means you no harm.
Nor do I."

Gazing down upon him was a long, sleek indigo-scaled leupak with dainty paws, large, batlike ears, and eyes like diamonds, her tail coiled

around the simple throne she lay upon, a sheer, white shawl settling neatly over her neck and shoulders.

The moon hung huge and round in the windows just behind her, illuminating her scales in a faint, otherworldly glow.
The strange leupak's eyes seemed dimmer than they aught to have been, and her head was not held high and proud as such a magnificent creature should have, as though she were quietly suffering from some mysterious ailment.

Beside her, Nigel stood in costume, the dragon's rubber head hanging with his upset as he wrung his hands.

Too many questions bubbled up from Nefirian's throat all at once, even as his heart ached within his chest, his head still pounding faintly from his collision with the floor.
"I don't understand. I don't know what this is, or what's going on. I'm so *cold*," Nef burbled halfheartedly, glancing away and closing his eyes.

He didn't feel fit to look upon her, even though she seemed to be one of his people, outwardly.

Something was horribly off, but...

"In dreams, you and I would be considered equals," the odd leupak said softly, her ears twitching. "You carry yourself with an air of certainty, of knowledge that your power is absolute. But here, in the realm of physical things, you are *unmistakably mortal*.
"Your once-best friend has suffered at the hands of this planet and the challenges it contains for him, but he thrives in it, and with it, in a way he cannot yet understand.
"He is Awake, but he has no one, nothing to guide him."

Nefirian's anger swelled within him again for a moment, but he grudgingly relented. This... this "leupak", for he knew, somewhere, that it wasn't a leupak at all, was something he knew he couldn't dare to risk the wrath of.

He didn't want to hear about Kelan; he didn't *care* about Kelan right now, least of all to hear how fantastic he was. How ironic; he'd come full circle in less than half an hour.

"You understand the ways of the people of Valenth, and do everything necessary to win their hearts and captivate their minds. You persuade, befriend, and manipulate to position yourself deep within every circle you can, to provide protection for yourself and a life of luxury the people who serve you would envy.
"But you are still afraid, still uncertain of the influence you hold, and all too aware that a single false step means ultimate disaster for you and your way of life.
"That is *your* reality in this world of flesh, blood, and souls. Your great strength is that of the mind-- formless, infinite... but ultimately noncorporeal."

"...but why are you telling me this?" He demanded softly, stung; not a single word was incorrect, not an accusation untrue, and it shook him to his core. He had always been a secretive person, even as he played the part of socialite and butterfly; it was a clever, careful ruse. How could someone so open, patient, and inviting have dangerous secrets to keep?

"Because all three of you have room to grow, and you must grow quickly now, or you will *die*, very soon. And I would like to help you, if you should allow it." She paused, raising one of her tiny paws to her mouth and coughing for a moment, before staring down at him with her shimmering eyes.

"What sort of help do you have in mind? I apologize for my suspicion, but I've had a terrible day, and little has led me to believe that it'll improve," Nef said, his voice wavering.

"I will not lead you on, Dreamwaker. Valenth has long been an unstable planet, with unstable powers at play within and around it. The forces you have come to know so well have been in need of balance since well before your people had even come to pass."

"And you want me to... balance something? I think you've got the wrong Chapter," he laughed sharply. "I don't do balance, or telling people what they can or can't do, or punishing them when I think the planet's in danger. That's all Kelan, and to be quite frank? It suits him.
Let him keep his righteous bullshit-- I intend to stay in the market of finding new and better ways to make dreams come true for anyone who really wants it, balance and Vitae and whatever the hell else be damned. People are more than capable of punishing themselves simply by living out their lives. Mistakes happen; it's only logical.
"Anything with free will will make bad decisions and suffer for it; it's not my place to judge or punish someone for that. I'm here to grant wishes, to make dreams come true, along with the consequences that come along with them.
"Some day, *my* dreams will come true, too," he added wistfully.

The strange leupak smiled softly. "No. I want you to carry on just the way you have."

The Dreamwaker rose an eyebrow. "Oh? Well, if that's the case... what are the terms?"

"Complete your project as swiftly as you are able; time is of the essence. I will assist you as best I can; my power waned many centuries ago, but soon I will have the means to leave this place. I will explain in greater detail when the time comes.
"Until then, Artemio will serve as my hands-- he can provide you manpower, sorcery, and anything else you may require until your time of ascension."

Nefirian's eyes grew wide. "My time of... S-surely, you *don't mean*--"

"Should you succeed in the task set before you," Chira said, her ears perking slightly, "Yes. *You shall."*

Book V Chapter 31: New Game, Old Flame

Laps-du-Ment Grande Ballroom
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Far across the room, a small magical portal popped into existence just within one of the shady alcoves surrounding the center floor; carefully, Nefirian stepped out, looking cold and uncomfortable, followed closely behind by the man in the dragon costume.

With a wave of a gloved hand, the portal seemed to dissolve into thin air, and the fellow patted the rotund Chapter on his bare shoulder.

Kelan's eyes narrowed, his lips pursed.

The strange man's aura was almost *unmistakable*; he could hardly sense it beneath the Mirajin before, but his return was like a wave of chilling water flowing over him.

I'll teach you everything you need to know, little god...

He was no *man* at all.

With growing dread, he watched as the costumed demon shook hands with the Dreamwaker before shuffling away into the crowd.

Had Nefirian just *sold his soul?*

For *what?*

Swallowing, he bit his lip and rose from his seat, striding brusquely across the room to confront him a second time.

But he didn't get far. "*Kelan?* Kelan, is that you?"

Kelan froze, taken aback as the mostly-blonde elf excitedly grabbed hold of his shoulders.
"I-- *Bastion*. I hardly recognized you beneath all the... *clothes*," he began.

"I *knew* it was you. You always walk like you're gonna punch somebody. Why don't you ever come visit? Don't you like me anymore?!" Bast sniffled, his eyes wide and wet.

"I-- of course I like you," Kelan gasped. "I've just had a lot on my mind, with the Firestarters and--"

"A lot on your mind? Psh. I know what your problem is," Bast said, abruptly dragging him towards the stairs.

"I don't *have* a pr--well, I mean, there isn't--" Wordlessly, Bast shoved a small packet into his hands before continuing to pull him, leading the confused ranger across the balcony and down a long hallway. "What is--*oh*. Bast, I *can't just*--"

"You only can't 'cause you're too busy being all serious! I'll fix that, though," he declared, pulling open a door, shoving Kelan in, scampering in after him, and finally locking it shut.

Downstairs, Nefirian sat down with an exhausted sigh, watching the people mull about and dance.

Now and then, they seemed to glance expectantly up at him with eyes of deep red, eerily contrasting with porcelain-white skin.
The windows clattered ominously, and dark, winged shapes fluttered by, some pausing to stare into the ballroom-- or at him.

He was still cold from his impromptu trip to Hel, and shaken from the things he had seen and heard.

He had seen Kelan making a beeline for him-- and Bast neatly intercepting him before pulling him away. Sometimes, he rather did like the waking world as it was; little life-saving coincidences like that meant so much more here.

But now, the stakes had risen higher than he could've ever imagined.

With the Ball soon drawing to a close, he had to successfully evade Kelan for another twenty-four hours before he was reasonably safe from his sharp eyes and accusing finger. Even if he survived the holiday, the short-tempered chapter would be breathing down his neck, waiting for him to slip up and show his hand pre-emptively.

But on the other hand... now, he had *help*.

Rising to his feet again, he made his way to the entrance, pulling open the grand double doors to greet his new allies as Nigel fell into step behind him.

"They're all aware of our terms?"

"Absolutely. You won't regret this, I promise."

"If anything goes wrong, Nigel, I *won't live to regret it*."

The little chapter and the costumed man watched as viadante and Iicarn wheeled about together in the evening sky.

Book V Epilogue

Laps-du-Ment Grande Ballroom
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Visitors flooded out of the ballroom the way they had come-- eager for their own beds, or at least a slow and comfortable ride home in a warm traincar, chattering excitedly about the great fun they had enjoyed this year, pondering how the festivities would be topped in the years to come.

Great gilded carriages pulled by beasts of all kinds pulled up to the stone stairs in a slow procession, passengers climbing into their doors, hanging from the little windows to wave to parting friends with promises to send a lodica to catch up with them in a day or two, or maybe longer.

Kelan rested quietly against a cool stone wall nearby, gazing wistfully at Selarion as he gathered his bag into his carriage to make the journey home.

He wouldn't be going with him tonight; there was too much that needed to be examined here, too much information to gather.
He'd find a safe place to rest and sleep off the evening's highs-- likely a tree in the wilds somewhere-- before he began his search for answers.

It had been good to spend time with Selarion, and even catch up with Bastion after so many years (even if he had inadvertently prevented him from catching Nefirian and putting the fear of the Ancients into him), but now, it was back to business.

Abruptly, something large fell from the sky to land before him, fluffing itself up before gazing into his soul with eyes that were instantly and painfully familiar.

A griffin.

A golden griffin, with a rich, brown mane that faded away into a coat of pure white fur.
Screeching at him, it revealed a scrollcase tied to its leg; he untied it carefully, opening the canister to read the contents as discreetly as he could manage.

The griffin that has presented you with this message is a member of the Templars of Aqk; you will no doubt recognize her influence and have many questions.

These questions will be answered soon, but time is of the essence-- It is absolutely ESSENTIAL that you come to Lassenbhurg the moment you are able to do so.

You and I spoke only once, when you were but a whelp too young to recall, but I am a very old friend of Aqk's, and I require your assistance.

For Sasha's sake, and for the sake of Valenth itself, we implore you.

- DILNDROU

"Take me, quickly," he said simply, bowing to the feathered beast before climbing upon its back, and in a great blast of wind they were gone.

Irnross Station
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Elliot fidgeted slightly in line as the conductor loaded the gleaming train, passengers scurrying on with bags and costumes in hand.
The cold autumn air nibbled at her cheek, and she huddled her head in close to her breast, rubbing her hands together to warm them.

But an eager buzz suddenly invaded her space, causing the person just before her to turn his head, scowling in disapproval.
With a squeak, she clapped her hands over the tiny dragonfly lodica, then shuffled out of line to listen to its message in relative privacy, off to the side.

"Greetings, Elliot! How fare you?

I'm calling to inform you that the Interceptor Prototype has successfully entered beta testing phase; we'll be running the final tests and diagnostics soon, and I'd simply love if you could take part.

Would you be able to meet me at the MIRACLE Factory in Gier in a week's time? You can give the old girl a test drive, and we can discuss arrangements for your training sessions to come.
I can't wait to hear from you-- take care, my darling."

Elliot could hardly stop herself from squealing in delight; carefully, she tucked the lodica away within her coat pocket.

She'd send Scott a return message as soon as she was settled in her cabin.

The Underbelly
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

He hated to have taken off without Bast just after the Ball, but important matters needed handling, and having him come along would simply confuse and upset the poor thing.
He'd be happy enough with his prrbs to keep him company on the ride home, for now, and the Thorneleupaks he had hired on as guards would keep him more than safe.

He had spent some much-needed quality time with Kelan, after all-- he'd be fine for a few hours. Perhaps it might've cooled the hot-headed chapter's perpetual anger, as well.

One could only hope.

Nefirian pulled his cape around his shoulders, the tiny mirajin crystals hanging from its edges tinkling like little bells as they collided into each other.

The lodica flew at him like a bullet-- he caught it just inches away from his shoulder, its wings beating furiously between his fingers. He paused to listen, his ears perking in surprise. Finally, he laughed.

"Good to hear from you, Na'th, and well done. Ignore the Court for now; I'm not surprised to hear they've set up shop in Aensdoun as well. Don't tell them a word-- but you know that.
"Have your party gather as many artifacts and tablets as they can find, both from the Trior Grounds and any ruins you can get your hands on, and then I want you to return home.

"Bring Gabriel with you; starting now, he's Main Branch, 1st Class. Just tell him he's getting a promotion and he'll recieve his new orders when he arrives. It's important that you get back home in at two weeks' time or less; *plans* have changed. In a good way, I feel.
"Love you, puppy. I'll see you when you get home."

Nonchalantly, he threw the tiny robot into the air, watching with a satisfied smile as its wings took action once more, sending it speeding off through the dark tunnel the way it had come.

The rose-skinned viadante standing beside him gently sat a clawed hand upon his shoulder, her flat black eyes like pools of shadow upon her face. He turned his head to grin at her, nodding once before proceeding into the tunnels.

"Now... let's go tame ourselves a lion."

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Intermission: Is That Even A Word?

Teal Deer Taxidermy and Leathers
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Reks held an enormous sewing needle clasped firmly between her teeth, carefully pinching two sheets of vividly dyed leather together and eyeballing their position.
She took the needle from her mouth, pressing it through the tough material with a steady hand, breath held as though convinced that the slightest wrong move would cause a global catastrophe of some sort.

Of course, in her mind, it *would*; this was Very Important Work, after all, and if anything wasn't put together just right, one of her new friends could fall apart at the seams at a Very Crucial Moment and ruin everything!

"It's okay, it's okay. I'm a professional after all!" she chirped, blue eyes shining brightly.
"I've been doing this for a little while now, and I like to think I'm pretty good. All of the stuff in here, I made myself."

The little shop was stuffed with curios of all kinds, from shiny brass trinkets and knives for cutting through tough hides, to glass eyes and fine furs and bits of brightly-colored crystal scattered across desktops and tossed haphazardly over antique chairs.

Of greatest interest were the menagerie of whimsical taxidermied beasts arranged artfully throughout the room. Towering beasts with toothy, snarling mouths leered in silence beside prancing elk and slinking great cats, some showing signs of mirajin mutation while others were painted and decorated with horns, talons and limbs not their own.

Reks liked to think of herself as the best rogue taxidermist and archaealchemist in Chimre.
She may have very well been right, even if only by virtue of being the *only* rogue taxidermist and archaealchemist in Chimre.

But she was still Totally The Best at it.

"Lots of people come by here with their dead stuff so I can pretty it up, or just to come look at what I've got and maybe buy a curiosity or two to take home and scare their friends with," she grinned.
"What I'm working on right now? It's Extra-Super-Duper Special, and it's just for me." Reks' eyes were dinnerplate-huge.
"But if you're really quiet about it and don't go talking to people, I can tell you all about it! See this thing?" she asked, gesturing towards a large, oddly-shaped pink jewel atop her workbench."It's a crystallized heart. No, really-- *a real heart!* It used to be made outta meat.
Probably from an elk or a bear or something like that. They have to be pretty big so they can fit all the alchemy stuff in.

"It's complicated-- you probably wouldn't understand," she added. "I use a secret process to make 'em, and then I can use them to make mypilisaurs!"

Reks scrunched her nose.
"What's a pilisaur? Man, *are you serious?!* ... well, I guess you wouldn't know, since they're Super-Secret and all.
Anyway, pilisaurs are named after me! They're kinda magical, and kinda alchemical, too. They're made out of all natural parts, except for when I have to do stuff like turn them into miracrystal," she said, eyeing the heart pointedly.

"The skins are all leather that I tan and dye myself in the best colors, and then I sew them up and fill them up with bones and muscles that have to be alchemied up so they won't rot away but they're still workable, too.
And once I get the heart in and close them up and finish my special process-- *no, no,* I can't tell you about that, it's a trade secret..."

Reks leaned in close to whisper, glancing over her shoulder.

"Then? They *come to life!* It's magic! Except not totally, since it's kind of science, too.

"Anyway, the pilisaurs are my best friends and awesome travel companions! Except that's not really right either, since friends need brains and I dunno how to use those for anything. They get mushy and gross way too fast, so crystallized hearts are way better.
Anyway, they're dumb unless I can tell 'em what to do, so they're really just toys.

"But *shhhhhhh!* Don't tell them that. What if one of them figured out how to think and they got sad? That'd be *awful*...

"There are some finished ones hanging out in the back of the shop. You can look at 'em if you like, but don't touch! I mean it, okay? They're super-tough and all, but they're not indestructible. Sometimes if something with a lot of vitae gets near them, it screws up the preservation."
She frowned again, pausing to thoughtfully scratch her cheek.
"The leather and muscle all starts to rot, and my threads pop open. Worst of all, this funny gunky greeny-black goo starts leaking out of them. It's not nice at all, and I think that stuff might be dangerous, too!

"So be careful. It's a lot of trouble to fix when that happens, and my pilisaurs are *priceless*, okay?"

Reks returned to her work with a long, low sigh, seeming to suddenly lose interest in the conversation. Tiny mice scurried across the dusty floor beneath her swinging feet, searching in vain for some lost crumb to nibble.

"Look around at anything you like, and lemme know if you need anything-- I'll be busy working for a while.
But you prolly shouldn't stay too long, okay?

"I dunno where you came from with your funny clothes and your little mechanical flashy bits, but Valenth's dangerous for outsiders-- *really, really* dangerous.
Like... most people've never seen anyone like you before, and there's not a whole lot stopping them from snatching you up and finding out what makes you and your stuff tick."

The *Aeneski* girl grinned unsettlingly.

"I could fill up all my fingers and toes with names of people who'd wanna do that..."

Intermission: Can't Bear It

Bordello of the Disciples
Gier, South Dreamsong

The grand hall had been wrapped from head to toe in the finest silks and velvets the Erosions could buy. Imported from far-off lands such as Soril and Liasse, they had been well paid-for, but Remy saw little reason for complaint.

The quality fabrics made for exquisite cushions and couches, and he couldn't imagine having anything less for his new temple, small though it was.
In time, they would have the means to build outwards and upwards-- perhaps even opening new branches in other neutral cities-- and he could concern himself with larger, grander buildings.

For now, the only size that mattered was the one in his--

A prrb pressed its blunt snout into his palm, buzzing distressedly.
Its fur was a rather fetching shade of chocolate brown, accented with rich red markings.
Prrbs didn't come in those colors naturally, and the creature hadn't quite gotten used to the change.

But, well, why didn't they?
The big, fluffy beasts had every right to be as vivid and flashy as he did.

And Remy knew he had every right to be as vivid and flashy as he damn well wanted to be.
"Don't look so upset, huh?" he cooed, lifting the bear's big head to kiss its nose and tweak its antennae.
"I know I'm still getting the hang of this... this... changey-wangey thing, but it didn't hurt, right? And you look fantastic.

After all, you didn't care much for the blue on grey."

A prrb across the room eyed him pointedly from its seat atop some jewel-hued cushions as it pawed at the pale blue ruff of fur around its neck.
The red and brown prrb grumbled dismissively and flopped down upon its butt.

"Everyone's a critic," Remy sighed.

Intermission: Like You Get to Sleep

Something cold and wet dripped down the back of Gabriel's neck.
Flinching, he reached to brush it away, frowning disapprovingly at the glob of sticky pink goo that clung to his fingers when he looked at his hand.
He spun, and found himself face to face with the source.

Crying out, he stumbled backwards away from the creature as it dripped ooze, its eyes wide and staring as it came closer.
With every step, its feet slapped wetly against the hardwood floor, leaving a trail of glistening ichor in its wake.

Miraplasm, Gabe thought frantically. *Is this thing made out of miraplasm?*
Dreamwaker, it made skin contact-- I touched it...

And just as his flesh began to writhe and peel away, he forced himself awake.

His bedsheets were plastered to his sweaty skin, and his heart pounded furiously in his chest.
Rolling out of bed, he lurched out to the kitchen to pour himself a glass of cold water.
Gabe drank it joylessly, staring through the floor-length window at the glittering lights of Laps-du-Ment at dawn.

Oh, come on, he thought bitterly.
Of all people, what need do I have for nightmares?

Taking a step forward, something cold and viscous squished between his foot and the floor.

Book VII Prologue

The Limbo Peninsula, South Dreamsong

Hot, sticky blood drizzled from his hands as he gazed down at the corpse before him with a mix of shock, awe, and a numb, growing realization that he had *actually done it*.

There was certainly no instinct involved; it was a little training, a little desperation, and a sizeable helping of dumb luck that he'd even managed to find the thing, let alone managing to bring it down with little to show for it but a few bruises.

His muscles were burning and sore from overexertion and the fight; he took great, gulping breaths of air and waited for his heart to grow steady and slow again.

The night air was cool and refreshing, and he savored it as best he could before gazing down upon his former prey.

No.

Prey was entirely the wrong word. He wasn't... he wasn't going to do *anything* with it.

Like *eating it or something*.

That would be...

The leupak lay before him in the crisp grass, teeth bared and eyes wide in death, multiple gashes torn through its sides and flank where dark blood and brilliant green venom oozed down into a sticky puddle beside it. It was a relatively plain one, he decided, with four eyes, four legs, and a stump of a tail that ended in a fork.

People always talked about how thick leupak skin was, but he hadn't expected to nearly bounce off of the thing in his initial charge; beyond toppling it over, the so-called attack had done little more than startle it.

Startling it had been enough to give him a chance for an opening, however. His target tumbled into the grass in shock, and he set upon the beast with the steel-clawed gloves he had been lended by his superiors.

The rubbery flesh was hard to puncture, but he had torn through it easily enough after taking a solid hold of the monster's nape in his own jaws (a useful tactic, brutal as it seemed to him in hindsight).

It had ended relatively quickly after that; he had simply flayed and slashed with all his might until he felt the leupak slump defeatedly beneath him.

It had been much simpler than he was expecting, all things considered.

But now, he wasn't completely certain he was proud of himself. He'd accomplished what he was certain would become a rescue mission at best, or his own death at worst, but something was... *off*.

Worse, he had the unnerving feeling that something was watching him.

With a beleaguered sigh,Cazwellrose to his feet, took a few steps forward, and promptly retched beside his conquest.

Book VII Ch 1: Never Alone

The Flamekeeper's Cabin
The Firestarters' Campgrounds
Heaven's Pillar Forest, Aensdoun

"Everything. I've lost everything, and I have only myself to blame,"Kelan said, slumped limply in his chair with his head hung low as Dilndrou looked on.
"I knew better than to allow myself to become attached from the start... but they were my *family*..."

"And you have always known in your heart that all things must come to an end, have you not?" The silisk lord's voice was uncharacteristically gentle.
"You are overseer of life and death; all things must die. You must come to terms with that, and your part in it, before you can ever consort with other beings without fear of loss.
"And yet... what have you lost? Companions, a lover, yes.
But you know that all things in this world are impermanent and temporary, and the cycle must continue. Flesh and blood fades, but the vital spirit is part of the essence of the world.

So, then, have they not become part of you and all else?"

Kelan gazed up at him with weepy eyes. "If only I had your rational mind in even the best of times, Dilndrou. I know these things... but *knowing* them doesn't do much to soothe my pain.
Even though they have returned to the cycle, I'll never see them again, or *touch them*, or..."

Dilndrou scratched his cheek. "You are a force of nature with the heart of a mortal man. I do wonder if there isn't some specific reason for such an odd combination.
You see the connection between all living things in plain sight, and yet you see them not as one collective, immortal entity in spirit, but a collection of individual creatures which cease to be upon the death of the flesh.
You're an enigma, Kelan."

"I am a mortal man, Dilndrou.
I'm a mortal cursed to live forever and die a hundred million deaths."

"You're short-sighted and single-minded," Dilndrou concluded simply. "It's a luxury you can no longer afford... and what around the Twin Suns is that commotion over?"

Angry and panicked shouts and cries drifted in from the windows along with the sounds of weapons being drawn.
Concerned, the two men rose to head outside, Kelan pausing for a moment behind Dilndrou to regain his composure and dab at his red eyes with his cape.

Outside, they discovered an enormousFlarionstanding defiant at the very center of the campgrounds, her pink eyes glinting in the light of the setting suns as Firestarters approached warily, swords and bows held at the ready.
The dragon had one of the ornate painted marks of theRenatusupon her face, Kelan noted.

Scowling ferociously, the Chapter spread his wings as he approached, Dilndrou close by his side.

"What is the meaning of this?!" he snarled. "Have you come to surrender your life in exchange for the atrocities you've committed in the name of Valenth?"

The dragon gazed sadly down at him.
She was old-- ancient, in fact, her worn hide covered in scars upon scars and odd runes carved into her scales.
Flaring her crest, she delicately placed a hand upon her face and swept it towards her ear, smearing the ash tattoo away.
"Grandfather," she said softly, "I can only hope to repay this world for the horrible things I've done, but not with my life. *Not yet*."

Spreading her wings, the old dragon settled upon the ground, allowing hundreds of fae to crawl down from her back, flooding the campground with sprites, cobolds, and nymphs.
Several *Aeneski* followed suit, carefully unloading supplies and setting them in the dust nearby.

Dilndrou rose an eyebrow. "What is this, Kelan?"

But Kelan set a hand upon his shoulder, shaking his head gently before rushing forward to meet the strange dragon face to face.

"Ireliss, how--"

"I'm so sorry, Grandfather," she said with tears in her eyes. "It's been a long, difficult journey, and I fear I'll need to rest very soon. Leaving my Father was one of the hardest things I've ever done, and I have the blood of innocents on my hands, possibly more than I could ever hope to atone for.
Someone had to keep watch over him and his temper, and make sure he didn't go too far... but it's all worse than that. *So much worse than I could have imagined.*"

"Tell me what's happened. Please," Kelan begged, wrapping his arms around her neck in a gentle embrace.

"Originally, I only meant to advise him as best I could, and keep him out of trouble. You have to understand," Ireliss said.
"But everything started happening so quickly... Father disappeared into Chimre for a few days, and when we next saw him, he was out of his mind.
He said he'd visited with the Greatmother and that she had decided to come with him and tell him how to save Valenth. He spoke to the shadows as if he truly saw something within them, offering him guidance... and yet, there was nothing there.

"Before long, it became apparent to me that he'd been exposed to more Mirajin than I've ever seen in my life. I don't know what happened to him in Chimre, but he's never been quite right since then, and it's only gotten *worse*.
I've tried purifying him, but nothing works... the mirajin just sucks up and consumes any vitae he comes into contact with."

Kelan bit his lip, pressing his face beneath Ireliss's chin to feel the warmth of her scales against his skin.
Ireliss was one of the few surviving dragons from the clutch that had sprouted in Schalle hundreds of years ago, and by far one of the most powerful-- Valdren's own daughter, and a master vitalist beyond compare.

If *she* was incapable of neutralizing Valdren's mirajin sickness...

"It's as I feared.
He had every right to be angry with me, Ireliss... but the madness that drove him to attack Aqk's Peak can't have been his own."

Ireliss shook her head. "He's had brief periods of clarity since then, and he deeply regrets everything that's come to pass.
But with each day, he loses a little more of himself. He's mutating, Grandfather, and the peak is changing along with him. Casari's taken it upon herself to seal him away within the center and take control of the Renatus on "his behalf"... in the height of his illness, she saw her chance to rule.
"She recently left with a number of others to lead some attack across the ocean, so I gathered what refugees I could find in the wilds of Schalle and left as swiftly as I was able, at my Father's whim and with his blessing."

Kelan drew a deep breath, biting back his tears; there was no time for them now.
"Gierwas Casari's doing, then. That explains everything."
"She's mad, and she doesn't even have the excuse of mirajin poisoning behind it. She'll stop at nothing to set all of Valenth to the torch, Grandfather."

"Well, we'll hardly let her.
I'm glad you're here for us, Ireliss. I'm sure your father would be proud."

She glanced quietly away, watching the suns sink below the horizon.

"I'm glad to be home."

Book VII Ch 2: Mutants of a Feather

The Mimorre Ridge, Chimre

Giovan straightened his tie needlessly as he rode in the unicorn-drawn carriage with his employer and lord, watching the light dance through the glassy blue leaves of the trees surrounding the tiny road.
Vivid color in all directions threatened to overwhelm his vision. High above, the twin suns set the sky alight in a strange violet fire, deepening to cobalt blue as the skyline met with the trees below.
Shining white creatures broke away from the clouds, falling like comets into the forest or soaring gracefully just above the canopy, where the trees themselves had transformed into striped and towering wooden oddities perhaps better suited for other planets.

All things considered, Chimre was far more beautiful than the brown-and-grey smog of Gier and Axl.

Something in Gio's head buzzed anxiously, pulling him out of his reverie.
Furrowing his brow and clenching his teeth, he pressed a hand to it to try and soothe the discomfort away.
"Almost there. You feeling alright?" Nefirian asked, concern furrowing his brow.
"It's just *the thing* acting up again, no biggie. It'll pass in a second," Gio insisted, folding his arms back behind his head and trying his best to relax.
It-- the thing the Lord-Doctor had put in him with the assistance of theskeevy old man-- was, for the most part, rather amicable for a monstrous parasite from another universe.
Apparently happy enough to have found a way out of its homeplane (Gio refused to consider the implications of that for long, and it was perfectly content to let him change the subject), it had immediately set terms for their mutual benefit which the human scientist saw as perfectly reasonable, all things considered.
He could think of no better situation than to be possessed by an alien being which understood the importance of keeping its host alive and well.

Unfortunately, there *was* the odd side-effect, though most of them were hardly worth worrying over.
The headaches were the most frequent, minor though they were, and a small nuisance to bear in exchange for proper telepathic power. Who was he to complain about *that?* It certainly beat the consequences of the failed mirajin experiments, and the Lord-Doctor had fulfilled his long-time promise with that alone.
His marked increase in strength meant he often broke things around the house and laboratory when he forgot himself, but those sorts of things were to be expected.
He'd grow more accustomed to it before long, and that'd be the end of it. On top of that, he'd never have to worry about ruffians trying to mug him in the city streets again-- easily worth a few ruined specimens.
The eye thing was a little...*unexpected*, but also minor, explained off atSplitchaas an experimental ocular installation for a bit of extra cash.
He knewLyricandDidierwouldn't buy that fib, but they were the boss's sons anyway, so that was no big deal.

He kinda missed his old, dull grey eyes a bit, but the bright-ass blue was kinda growing on him.
But the big thing-- the one change that put Giovan on edge-- was his sudden and unshakable anxiety around *certain people*.
He wasn't sure exactly what set that off, but it was severe enough that he feared for his sanity.
Suddenly, the old man was an object of revulsion to be avoided at all costs, and the dim but regrettably lucky kidmost of his recent research involved had become overwhelmingly infuriating.
Gio had done his best to explain the sudden mental shifts to the Lord-Doctor, hoping he would recieve some sort of pardon.
He *had*, in a way-- theChapterhad gone out of his way to keep Gio and the strange man away from each other whenever they were both on theCathedralgrounds.

But it seemed as though his assignments with Gabriel Gaunthier had only become more frequent, much to his irritation.
It took every ounce of will not to smear the bio Doc's face against the nearest wall whenever they met; It was all Giovan could do to curb his irrational rage by putting the poor idiot through increasingly more strenuous testing.

If he was so damned lucky, he'd come out of it just fine, after all.

Of course, the fact that he *had* had done little to soothe Doctor Giers' anger.

"Gio, we're here. Feeling any better?" The Lord-Doctor's voice was gentle.
"Yeah, a bit-- *son of a bitch!*"

Climbing out of the gilded carriage, Giovan found himself surrounded on all sides byiicarn, tall and sleek with spears, swords and bows coated in gleaming gold.
They leered down at him from behind their porcelain masks-- some plain half-masks, others in the shapes of various animals and beasts-- as they stretched and slowly beat their iridescent wings.

They were hardly a matter of concern to Gio, however.

Just behind them, a great and gaping hole had been torn through the mountain ridge itself, revealing the long-lost continent of Mimore to the world once more.
Beyond the rubble and the towering Ranpa leupaks working tirelessly to clear the debris from the forest's edge stood more miracrystals than he could count, leading off into the horizon as far as the eye could see like mountains in their own right.

Each of them was enormous, pulsing with a familiar magenta glow.

"Nef," Gio whispered, all formalities forgotten. *"What the hell ..?!*
There has to be enough energy here to power every city on Valenth for *ages!*"
"I won't need ages, Giovan. Just a few minutes, when the time comes.
There's much that needs to be done in the days to come, preparations upon preparations. For *your* part, I'm having you moved out of Splitcha permanently. "

Gio laughed nervously. *"Permanently?* Have I done something wrong?
If I'm mishandling subjects or something, just say the word and I'll--"

But the*Aeneski*put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.
"C'mon, Gio. You know I don't do things that way. I'm *promoting you.*"

"Pr..promoting me? I thought--"

"I need every brilliant mind I can get right now. I brought you out here for a reason-- some things I can't do or say in the public eye, after all."

"Of course, milord." Gio was taken aback. "What would you have me do? And what about Galy?"

"You'll have all the time in the world for your music very shortly, " Nef reassured him.
"For now, I'd like you to become overseer of a few of my *special projects*, if you'd be so kind as to accept."

"How could I refuse?" Giovan paused. "And how "special" is special, exactly?"

Nefirian glanced pointedly at the iicarn.

"...Wait, hang on, *what?!*
How would I-- it's really, really freaking *awesome* for you to offer, but what could I do with these guys that could possibly be worth your while?"

"You're still thinking like a human, Gio.
They can help you with that-- and in return, I'd like for you to train new additions, and help them protect our fair countries, plural.
But you won't be working with just the iicarn. Some things, I can't trust to just anyone; I'm asking you to care for my *children* while I'm away from home, Giovan.

It's a favor I'd ask from no less than family."

Giovan furrowed his brow, watching in thoughtful silence as the Dreamwaker turned to feed shiny blue apples to the unicorns.

He *did* have a point.

Gio had finally gotten the supernatural powers he'd been promised years ago, but left to his own devices, he was ready to continue his mostly uneventful career as a psionics researcher and music mogul as if it'd never happened.
Whatever working with the odd, winged mutants involved, it was almost certain to be an interesting new experience, and put his new abilities to some use as well.
He wasn't sure what to say about the *family* bit, but it had always been common knowledge that the Dreamwaker was prone to grow close to his... projects.

"Alright, boss. I'm your man."

"Excellent! I'm sure you'll do just fine," Nef chirped, gathering Giovan up in a strong hug.
"Besides-- I just sent Starle out this morning to deliver a few messages. You'll have some time to get yourself settled in, and in a few weeks, you'll be working with a few familiar faces again. Sound good?"

Giovan admired the way the wings of the iicarn shimmered in the sunlight, throwing a thousand colors against the two Docs' white labcoats and the unicorns' hides.

He suddenly burst into hysterical laughter, reaching to push his glasses back upon his nose.

"Yeah. That sounds fuckin' *amazing*."

He couldn't wait to see the look on *his* face.

Book VII Ch 3: Shady Business

Sandsea Global Distribution Facility 7
Soril City,Lucsus

"This is where the amol are prepared for shipment,Rajiin," said thesiliskguide as he lead the royal and her guards into the warehouse.
Bundles of luminescent fungus from the cavern forests nearby provided the only light to be had in the building, bathing the workers, scientists and druggedamolalike in an eerie blue glow.

Sadinhadid not much care for it; she already disliked the secrecy with which the project was being conducted.
Since the chimaeras' return to Lucsus, she had made certain that every resource was put towards removing the amol from the continent by any means possible.
Particularly insane bounty hunters were showered in gold and jewels in exchange for amol heads, while the government itself hired and dispatched bands of mercenaries and slayers to hunt the beasts down.
The Grand Rajiin was aware that the heads of the Department of Knowledge were offering particularly lucrative reward to those who could manage to retrieve live amol for study.
She felt there was little use for a live amol, however -- she would never believe that opportunistic chimaera wouldn't attempt to follow Dalnak's treacherous example-- and had come today to learn exactly *what* was being done with them.

"Shipment *where*, precisely?" Her tone was acid. "These monsters are nothing but trouble in the desert, but I'm not certain I like the idea of sending them anywhere else, either."
"I'm not at liberty to say--"
"No? Have you forgotten who it is you're speaking to?" Sadinha lifted her lotus to eye the reptile warily. "I'd reconsider my position, were I you."
"Your Highness, if you'd forgive me," he said exasperatedly. "I can't speak of it, but the Head Researcher is in her office just ahead. I'd be skinned alive, please understand."

Unamused, she gestured with her head. "Take us to them, then."
The silisk quietly obliged, striding across the floor to rap his fist twice upon his superior's door.
There was no response; he nervously glanced down at Sadinha. "She is inside, but--"
Her guards opened it on her behalf, causing the white-coated human scientist at the desk inside to spin in her chair, glowering.
"What is the meaning of this?!"
"You've taken the words out of my mouth," Sadinha said. "What do you mean to do with these amol? You understand that the official word is to execute them on sight, yes?"
"We're shipping them away for research. They won't trouble your lovely country any longer."
"Not good enough; do *not* play games with me," the little Queen warned, standing neatly upon her hind legs for a bit of extra height.
"Where are you sending them, and *why?*"
"They are laboratory fodder, Rajiin. We have taken hundreds of the beasts from Lucsus; consider it a welcome removal."

Sadinha bared her fangs; her guards stepped forward to circle the scientist in her chair. "Perhaps you misunderstand. I am ruler of Lucsus, and I do not ask to be told.
I demand it, and you will inform me at once, or--"

The woman gazed languidly down at the miniature chimaera.

"Do you keep up with history at all, Grand Rajiin? You seem a bit young for the post, if you'll forgive the observation.
"I understand it's against Sorilian custom to mention touchy subjects in public, but if you'd allow me to remind you, you're little more than a puppet ruler. *Remember that*."

Sadinha removed the lotus from atop her head, her blue eyes hard.
"I'll be certain to keep that in mind, yes. *Guards?*"

The amol shrieked and clattered in their cages as the single gunshot rang painfully in their ears.

Book VII Ch 4: The Rose Courier

Gabriel'sHouse
Laps-du-Ment,Chimre

Gier, South Dreamsong - Disturbances in the Mirajin Mines!

Gabriel furrowed his brow as he paged through the *Laps Informer* over a bowl of lukewarm oatmeal.

According to the article,Faerwethrminers had gone on strike, sealing up the mines and refusing to re-enter them until the crazed spirits of the earth who lived within were calmed.
Siliskwere always going on about some spirits or another, but they were usually hard-pressed to stop working unlessDilndrouhimself commanded it.
An imagined threat likely wouldn't inspire the lizard-people to close operations en-masse.

Despite himself, Gabe wondered if perhaps theEnxiryixxhad returned to the surface again.
He was just about to sample a spoonful of cereal when a birdlike shriek and a crash just outside startled him out of his chair.

With an exaggerated sigh, Gabe headed out to his front door, reaching for the knob just as someone knocked.
He found a small, wide-eyed human woman in a white and gold uniform and cape, plucking leaves out of her azure hair and replacing her crumpled beret.

"Um, hello...?"
"Ah! Sorry, sorry. Did you hear that? Rough landing. Hello! You're Mister Gabriel Gaunthier, yes?"
Her heavy Chimri accent made even his name sound flowery; he paused a moment, temporarily uncertain.
"Yes... I *think?* Gah...Gah-brie-- how did you say that?"
"Fantastic! You have been assigned an assignment-- no, no, that's no good.
You have been... *given* an assignment! Yes, that's better, don't you think? You have been given an assignment by theOrganization. Very important.
"Very," she chirped, beaming up at him and forcefully slapping a gilded scrollcase into his hands.

She watched eagerly as Gabe removed the contents, quietly scanning through them.
He furrowed his brow.

"Well, it'll be nice to be back inAxlfor a while... but what the heck is a *kassen?*"

The odd courier smiled broadly at him. "No idea, *sorr.* I'm just the messenger, yes?"
"Of course. Sorry," he murmured, re-rolling the scroll. "Do I need to sign anything, or do you want this back?"
"Oh, *nonononon*, it is yours. Please, pack your things and proceed to the aeroport post-haste, dear Mister. There is a zeppelin waiting for you!"
"Got it. Thank you, um..."
"Starle! Please, call me Starle. It is my name!" she announced brightly.
"Thank you, Mister Gaunthier. I hope to see you again!"

"You're welc--" he began, his words strangling in his throat.

The chirpy courier melted away into a little avian dragon right before his eyes, shining white with scales edged in gold and a feathery blue crest.

Sliding her goggles neatly over her eyes, she smiled beakily, curtseyed daintily, and spread her birdlike wings, rocketing into the air and across the sky before Gabe could react.

"I... wha...*What the HELL WAS THAT?!*"

He stared in wide-eyed shock as a few crystalline blue feathers drifted gracefully down onto the ground at his feet.

Book VII Ch 5: Moon Eyes

Scenario Space, The Reverie

"It's been too long since we all had a nice little get-together," Nigel said glibly as he flitted across the scenarios with Nefirian, their arms neatly intertwined-- not entirely by choice. "And all the better to have a chance to do it here, on your grounds, hmm?"

"I'd hardly consider the entirety of the Reverie to be 'my grounds'," the Chapter said cautiously, watching as the world around them spun and rippled, flashing through forest and desert, mountain and sky, trees and clouds shifting and melting away to reveal towers of shining gumdrops and pits threatening to swallow them up forever.
"There are places here where my kin and I don't wander, just as in Valenth proper, and I'm comfortable keeping it that way.
I've never been one for trying to take over a world, be it a world of dreams or otherwise."
"Fair enough, fair enough. Still, you'll be among friends today. No worries, eh?"

"Yeah," Nef lied. "*Friends. No worries.*"

The Reverie grew calm and still at last as a plain of endless golden grass spread wide around them.
Nigel clicked his tongue, shielding his face from the brutal sunlight. "This's the place. Now, let's see if I can still do this. You ready?"
Despite its reputation as a chaotic, constantly-shifting realm, the Reverie had its static places, hidden far behind the Scenario lands.
Dreamers would never wander this way on their own, leaving the native Revere to carry out their duties away from the eyes of outsiders.
The savannah was a place Nef had never wandered across; he tended to remain in the deeper forests, and caverns where the sunlight rarely struck earth.

He watched cautiously as brilliant flashes of pure color danced through the fields.
"Let's just go, Nigel. I don't feel... *welcome* here."
"As you wish, sire," the old man said, rolling the syllables around on his tongue.
Raising his hand, he murmured a few magic words and spun on his heel--
--and as quickly as they had come to the savannah, they were whisked away again, standing within the center of a great temple carved of sand-colored stone.
Hundreds of odd, leonine people rose their heads to gaze at the newcomers from outside of the circle, eyes narrowed with distrust and teeth bared in threat.
The hair on the back of Nef's neck stood on end-- something unpleasant was here.

Something *worse* than these cats.

"Here, puss puss puss," Nigel cooed. "Don't be shy, Uncle Nigel's here."
"...and you come bearing *trash*, I see. *Why?*"
"... Nigel, I'm going to kill you if this is your idea of a prank," Nefirian hissed, watching in poorly-disguised horror as Vagary stepped forth onto the platform to tower over them. The Dreamwaker and the elemental lord exchanged venomous stares.
"Ohhh, do you two know each other already? And here I was thinking I'd get to introduce you!"
"We've met."
"Step aside, Artemio. I intend to finish what I started earlier," Vagary snarled.
"I wouldn't touch the cute little creampuff if I were you, Vaig. And it's *Nigel*, by the way," he added.
The beast was unamused. "What sort of name is--"
"HEY. Not your place. Call me by my name, or don't call me, kapeesh? People are so damned *rude*. It's not about what you want for me, it's about what *I* want for me.
Anyway, I brought you a present, so shut up and leave 'im alone."
The enormous magic elemental sighed impatiently, oblivious to the fat *Aeneski* as he stuck his tongue out at him behind his back. "Well?"

Nigel carefully removed a tiny black bat from his coat, letting the creature flutter into the air briefly before settling on the floor nearby.

It groomed itself briefly, then sat up on all fours, and the room seemed to bend and distort around it.

With a triumphant, keening shriek, the little bat transformed into an immense and shining violet dragon, her hide glimmering with thousands of tiny golden stars.
Aeneski and elemental alike gazed up at her, cowed.

"..*fucking Dreamwaker*," Nef swore unironically.
Vagary moved to kneel before the Elysian goddess, visibly shaken.
"Ch-*chira*. Is it truly you? I believed you long gone, with the others. How..?"

"Patience," she said softly. "Far too much patience. Come to me."
He did, gently kissing her claw. "Are the others... *is**Maena**..?*"
"No, my pet. The others are long dead. I'm so sorry."

The corner of Nigel's mouth twitched ever so slightly.

"Vagary, I have been ill since our people fell. Nigel has been helping me recover enough to return to the material world again someday, but disaster has struck, and I require your aid.
And the aid of the little creature here, as well," she said, gesturing towards Nef with her head.

Vagary followed her gaze, scowling. "Why *him?* Do you have any idea what he's done to the world? He is no better than Symphoni was... if not *worse!* I beg you, Night-Queen, let me *kill him and be done with it!*"
"No!" Nigel shouted, and everyone turned to stare at him. Nefirian blushed faintly.
"...we need him," he elaborated meekly.
"As I stated," Chira said calmly, "I need *both of you* if I am to recover fully. Nigel recently attempted to recover the Eye so that I might absorb it... however, he was intercepted by Dilndrou, who corrupted the crystal and broke it into fragments.
We were able to obtain and purify only a few, and the remainder are missing."

"What's this Eye thing, if you'll excuse the interruption?" Nef asked, raising an eyebrow.
"It's an old Elysian artifact, used to create the gods. We were hoping to find it and use it to restore Chira-- and possibly the others," Nigel added at Vagary's glance, "but Dilndrou apparently caught wind of it and decided to seize it for his own use.
It's all but lost to us now."

The Dreamwaker narrowed his eyes. "Of *course*.
He only recently attacked my son in an attempt to draw me out and demand I hand the Fatis Mirajin over to him, and attempted to kill me when I refused. He's gone *mad!*"
"It's true. If not for me, the old alligator would have done him in for certain," Nigel said matter-of-factly to his goddess.

"With the other gods gone, no doubt the Avatars have taken up their own agendas," Vagary growled. "It was Inneglio's bear who banished me again when I freed myself from the God-Emperor's spell at last.
There is no telling what Dilndrou may have planned... but that still does not excuse the damage this Mirajin has done to the material realm*and* our world!"

Chira shook her head. "Calm yourself, Vagary.
A little planar disruption is nothing that cannot be healed once the mother leupak's mission has been completed.
What we need is an even dispersal of energies to reverse your ancestors' manipulations."
Vagary's face grew dark.

"With all due respect, milady... I choose not to acknowledge those ties. I serve only the gods, now and forever--"
"And so you shall continue.

The Elysians' mistakes do not change the fact that they are responsible for my own creation and your transformation, Vagary. Shunning the elysians and thechimaerawill not burn away your lineage."

Nef frowned, eyeing Vagary curiously; he dared not voice his thoughts, but the goddess followed his eyes.

"Vagary as you see him now was enchanted by my twin sister, Maena. He is the elemental lord of arcane magic, but he was once merely a chimaera-- born of a union between elysian andvareli, the feline creatures which surround us.
He detested his form, and so in return for eternal loyalty to my sister, she recreated him to her liking."
Vagary closed his eyes and hissed in quiet fury.

Nefirian nodded his thanks to the violet dragon and edged slightly closer to her, certain the magical beast would smear him across the floor if he asked so much as a single question out of line.
"So the chimaera are descendants of the elysians? *Hybrids*, even? That explains why breeding them yields such chaotic results."
"Chimaera are wastes of flesh and an affront to the majesty of the vareli," Vagary spat. "Elysians are little better, though they at least managed to summon the spirits of the planet in their ignorance."
"They're crude and violent at times, yes," Nef thought aloud, "but isn't everyone? I find them pleasant enough.
Granted, it took a great deal of mental showmanship to convince them to bend the knee when they came to conquer my country, but I can hardly blame the modern people for the actions of a past ruler.
"Even less so when he died by... well, his own hand, if you want to be technical," he added grimly.

Vagary eyed him. "If the chimaera were bested by a creature such as you, you deserve one another."
"You're too kind," Nef said icily.
"Children," Chira sighed, rising to her feet. "I have kept my young charge waiting for too long; I should like to return to tending to her studies. I trust the two of you will refrain from violence in my absence?"
"Of course," Nef said, somehow less than convinced Vagary would agree.
"How isOpusdoing, lady?" he added hopefully.
"*Poorly*, if I am honest. She learns slowly and brokenly, at best; she will never take up magic.
Your crystal has all but consumed her mind, and what remains is more suited to wild dreaming than supporting a creature of her sort in any true semblance of life."
"...what do you mean by that?" His tone was cautious. "She just needs some extra time, and--"
But Chira was unsympathetic. "She is in an unfortunate state, as the last surviving member of her race.
I would warn you to make your peace with her while you can."
"You just don't understand her. She's perfectly fine-- *make my peace?* What are you even saying?! Chira!"
"Be merciful," she said simply. "We will speak again soon. But *later*."

And with that, the dragon-goddess withered away into a tiny, insignificant bat once more.
Nigel carefully retrieved her and placed her safely in his breast pocket, and nodded to the Chapter and the elemental.
"Nefirian, Vagary? It's been fun.
Remember, we're all on the same team now. No violence! *Peace and love!*"
Laughing, he exploded into a cloud of inky smoke and drifted through the temple windows on an idle breeze.

As the vareli watched with unfriendly, hungry eyes, Vagary glowered down at the fat little elf.
"I like this not, *make no mistake*.
If you step out of line, if you anger my goddess, or if you test my patience... I *will* kill you without hesitation or remorse.
Chira can find another hero if she wishes."

The Dreamwaker closed his eyes and spread his cape behind him, white brocade fabric and skin fusing and stretching into a pair of great wings as his body swelled and his face grew monstrous and blunt.
Fully transformed, he met Vagary's baleful gaze eye to eye, his fleshy spines flaring atop his thick, scaly neck.
"Try if it pleases you then, by all means," he purred, his three eyes shining bright with anger.
"It will never be like it was inAensdounagain."

And with a flick of his wings, theWhite Boralionlaunched himself through the temple ceiling and into the skies beyond, showering Vagary and his servants in shards of glass.

Book VII Ch 6: Starry-Eyed

The Cathedral of a Thousand Roses
Laps-Lucienne, The Reverie

Giovan Giers stood on the balcony of the great castle, looking out over the dreamscape before him as lumynos and leupaks wandered past, engaged in their own business.
The sky glowed and flashed like a jewel, although there were no suns to be found at the moment, and a cool breeze tickled his skin.

Far below, silvery trees swayed gracefully, weighed down by thousands of multicolored birds and the arboreal beasts who hunted them, lunging out onto the canopy to snatch a feathery morsel.
As he watched, his mind wandered; being in the Reverie felt too much like dreaming to him.
It was far too difficult to resist letting sleep take him and do what it may.

But a familiar voice snapped him to attention again, throbbing like electricity through his synapses.
What is this place? You have crossed into another plane.

The Prince-- as the symbiotic entity had insisted upon being called-- had awakened. His presence in the back of Giovan's mind was attentive and curious; despite the pull of the Reverie's magical energies, the scientist felt his focus returning.

He always remembered how weak and human he was when the outsider's powerful influence flowed through his body.

"This is the Reverie-- the realm of dreams, where my lord and master lives. As an organization, our presence in the material plane is minor, and mostly temporary.

As you've seen, my former occupation was as a researcher in the so-called 'real' world, studying the effects of near-fatal Mirajin exposure on the minds of sentient people.

I'll be doing work here for a while now, though, helping new iicarn and daedlans get accustomed to their new roles and teaching quaggies about the material world... and how poorly they can expect to be treated in it by the native folk, should they consider participating."

Gio wasn't entirely confident that he was the man for such a job, but he was willing to do his best. Splitcha had been taxing and dangerous work, and he welcomed a change of scenery and a chance to get to know the other side of the Organization's capital city.

Away from the Corruptor, the creature said.

"The... *corruptor?* Oh, the creepy old man." Giovan frowned.
"Yeah, he's not allowed to come here. I'm as glad for that as you are, I bet."
Let me use your hands, the entity said, and Giovan found them moving of their own accord before he could protest or agree.
He heard strange, trembling sounds resonating through his mind as his hands wove intricate patterns through the air.

As suddenly as the involuntary movements began, his hands dropped to his sides once more. The air around him seemed to shift and distort. With a soft *pop*, a dimple formed in the space before him, and three small, dark creatures crawled into being from within, their eyes shining a brilliant ice-blue that matched Giovan's own. Two nearby lumynos stopped in their tracks at once, eyeing Giovan with growing concern.
"... what is this? They look like the tiny demons the old man summons sometimes, but..."
These are the beings your people--and the Corruptor-- call "imps", as they truly are without his influence.
They are servants of the Starchildren. My kin.

He has stolen thousands of them from our home and changed them against their will.
He attempted to do the same with us, and failed, but I have seen the things he calls "viadante"... and they are pitiful mimicries of our people.

I do not like him, the Prince said, and Gio felt the entity's anger and hatred in his own heart.

"You *knew* him before we merged, even? Are you sure--"
I am sure, vessel; I would recognize that energy pattern from a universe away.
If you had not been disoriented and weak when I was first summoned, I would have torn him to shreds at once.

We will together, in time.

Gio shuddered, carefully taking the little imps into his arms.
The dark-skinned creatures clung tightly to his arms, buzzing and whistling in their strange, otherworldly language like living radios.

They were a sight better than Nigel's horrible little devils.

"I--we have to talk the Lord-Doctor about this. He'll know what to do.

In the meantime, the least we can do is make sure he keeps out of inner Organization affairs, and well away from the Brooding Grounds.
I doubt Nef will protest, either... friendly as the guy might pretend to be, anyone willing to mess with big-time necromancy is worth using caution around.

There's no telling what he might have planned for the leupaks, if this's true, and it'd break the Lord-Doctor's heart if anything happened to them."
So you understand.
I am glad to have joined with you, vessel. You are intelligent, the Prince said approvingly.

Gio headed for the staircase, frowning at the lumynos gazing at him with wide eyes.

"What are *you* looking at?
I had official business with myself, okay? Geez, some dreamkin..."

Book VII Ch 7: One Of The Pack

I do not belong in this place.

I am in a cage, in this bright and sandless square cave full of people-toys, garish and unnatural and strewn across the strange, soft floor. My packmates are nearby, but caged as well.

We do not belong here, and we cannot leave.

It is too cold, and full of the shrieking and rambling of the people who have brought us here and their cubs. We cannot see the suns; there are only the strange, tiny stars they have stolen from the sky. I can smell the crystal dreamstuff burning in them, but the people are stupid and do not notice.

The people-cubs jab things through the bars, taunting us and shouting to get our attention.
I bare my teeth and snarl at them, and they dart away and laugh in the sharp and irritating way that monkeys do.

It continues on for hours, until the young ones are called away and bits of scrap meat are tossed into our cages.

It is not enough, but it is all we get.
I am too proud to lick at the metal bottom of my cage.
Instead, I rest my head and wait.

The people chatter, embrace, and snuff their artificial stars.

Our eyes glitter in the failing light.

The people have been away for a while when two of our packmates press against the bars of their cages.
They curl in on themselves, baring their teeth as they grow and change.
The larger-- the female-- reaches through the bars to open hers, slipping out to release the rest of us.

The lion-people were smarter when they caught us; they made sure we could not break free.

These people think we are pets.

Once we have regrouped, we find their dens. They are asleep and unaware of us at first.

We paint the walls with them, and eat their bones.
One throws a shiny toy bird through the window just as we find them hiding alone in another room.
I stop to watch the trinket as it flutters off into the night, and the others devour them.

People are funny.

Full and as happy as we can be in this place, we gather in the largest den to rest together and lick our faces clean.

Before long, we hear footsteps in the places below us; soft footsteps, trying to be as quiet as they can.
Our ears are too keen, and their legs are too clumsy.

But we are tired and full of food, so we listen and wait.

Faces float into the doorway, their eyes wide in the dark.

These people have dull green pelts with bits of sparkling gold; they look like strange birds. There are markings like birds on their chests.
The big female sees them and tenses her muscles, and the rest of us rise to our feet.

The people keep their eyes on us, but speak softly to each other in a way I haven't heard before.

They sound like birds, too.

The big female and her mate stand up and roar.
Excited now, we gather around them and charge ahead; we get to eat these people, too!

But the bird-people pour into the room holding strange, bent sticks and long pieces of metal.

Before we realize what is happening, they are everywhere.

Feathers suddenly sprout from the big female's face and chest; she shouts and swings her arms, tearing into the bird-people as she falls.
The male follows suit, and suddenly, there are only three of us left.

We are not like them; we are only four-legged hyaen.

But we all fight together, as family.

Before I can close my jaws over the throat of one of the bird-people, my chest begins to burn, and then the world turns black.

Book VII Ch 8: Ouroboros

Firewing Base Camp
Whimsy Forest, South Dreamsong

"Hah, d'ja hear about the pack of hyaen they found up in some fancy mansion south of Faerwethr? Idiots bought them from some chimaera, pets for their spoilt brats or something.
Two of the things were fucking mirajin weres-- broke out of their cages and ripped the whole family to pieces. How much you want to bet the asshole who sold them knew?"

"Of course he knew. You know how chimaera are; charge you out the ass for something that's just gonna kill you."

The two Firestarters cadets laughed sharply as Cazwell leaned against a nearby tree, resting in the shade as he drank from a canteen.
They had a point, he thought, remembering the indigo-scaled she-beast who had sold him poison.

But could you judge an entire species on the actions of a few?

He considered the leupaks he had slain over the past few weeks, then quickly pushed them out of his thoughts.

"Hey, Christoph! How's our favorite little double agent?" One of the loud-mouthed soldiers grinned at him. "Racking up the kills, I saw. You're a hell of a slayer-- got the Fear yet?"
"I'm afraid of lots of things," he mumbled.
"I'm not worried about any hyaenidae, though. It's the leupaks I'm after."
The cadets exchanged curious glances.
"Woah, he hasn't picked it up by now? Dreamwaker must like you," the second considered aloud. "No soul-crushing nightmares? No crying in your bed all night?"
"Crazy. Listen, if the other slayers haven't told you about it by now... the Fear is something that happens to your mind when you piss off the Dreamwaker.
Every leupslayer I've ever met's caught it-- s'a curse or something like that," the first cadet said. "You start killing leupaks en masse, and next thing you know, you can't go to sleep without having nightmares all night. Nightmares custom-made to scare the living hell out of you personally.
"You can't stop them, and the only way to avoid it is by staying awake. S'why slayers either don't last long, or they end up stonking mad.
I guess they didn't want to scare you out of it, heh."

Cazwell frowned.
"Some bad dreams aren't going to scare me out of my revenge. I haven't had any, anyway."
"Bet you being a leupak leupslayer's confused him," the second cadet laughed. "Maybe we need more like you."
"If anyone in Dreamsong ever gets turned into a leupak again, I'm failing as a slayer anyway," Cazwell said sourly. "You better tell the Lieutenant I'm all she's got."
"Hey, hey. Only kidding, Chrissie... don't get your scales in a bunch."

The little brown leupak scowled at them, then turned his head and perked his ears as someone called his name nearby.
Harley trotted up the dirt path with her backpack tucked neatly under one burly arm, waving cheerfully with the other.
"Cazwell! Come take a walk out to the lake with me, eh?"
"Gladly. See you guys later," he said softly to the others, sliding his canteen into his collar and getting to his feet at once.

Glancing over his shoulder, he noted a small group of bystanders watching him from just within the deeper wood.
Although clothed in standard Firestarters green and gold, each wore a simple pin upon their breasts-- a single boreal pigeon feather, shining in the light.

Cazwell sighed.

"What's eatin' ya?" Harley frowned, leaning far down to stroke the leupak's head.
"Typikin," he grumbled, turning and striding quickly away. "Flamekeeper-damned leupak sympathizers have been following me around since I got settled in here. You'd never think they'd be in a place like this...
I can't believe they let them into camp, let alone give them the uniform."

Harley decided not to comment.

The suns glowed through the thick canopy of Whimsy Forest as Cazwell walked slowly alongside his silisk companion.
Insects buzzed hungrily around the pair, zooming in close to try and find gaps between their tough scales to bite at.

They followed the path in silence for a while, leaving the leupak to his thoughts as he preferred.

Harley was one of the few people he could stand speaking to lately, but she had noticed him growing steadily more anxious as time went on; she had decided it was best to let him start a conversation when he was ready to, and Caz was unspeakably grateful for that.

Firewing camp was full of excitable, noisy people who got far too much pleasure out of gossiping and nagging him for details of his hunts as though they thought it was some sort of recreational sport... or worse, the ones who seemed horrified by his existence not as a leupak, but as a venomborne who didn't want to be.

He supposed he couldn't expect them to understand the impact of having one's humanity stolen away-- or of knowing that hundreds of other people were suffering the same thing throughout the world.
Cazwell wanted himself back, but that was something he would never have again. He wasn't strong, brave, daring, or even insane; he was merely desperate for an outlet for his mounting frustration and self-loathing.

Meek as he was, he felt violence growing in his heart, threatening to take him over. How could he stand by and wait for it to affect someone he cared about?
If he could never be human again, he could at least channel his anger and hatred into something that might save lives, or at least save others from suffering this same fate.

Valenth needed *fewer* monsters like him in it, not more of them.
"Harley," he finally said.
"Yeh, Colin?"
Harley liked using his middle name. "It's cute!" she had said when he told her. "People don' use alla their names often enough!"
It had made him smile a bit back then.

He smiled again now, ever so slightly. "Have you ever heard of this "Fear" thing?
Those guys were saying it's a curse thing that happens to leupak slayers, but I haven't had any weird dreams or anything."
"Oh, nah. I don' believe in that kinda thing, y'know," she said thoughtfully. "Only gods an' witches ken curse people, and the Dreamwaker isn't either a'them."

Cazwell tilted his head curiously. "You don't believe in the Chapters? I thought everyone did."
"Naw, not really.
The Beasts are th' *real* gods, and mosta them wandered off once people started messin' with science an' all.
The Chapters? Just a few faeries with a lotta influence. They seem okay, though-- just th' same as any other world leader."
"Why join the Firestarters, then? The Flamekeeper's said to have founded them, and we're supposed to follow all his rules, after all."
"Well, Bapa said it'd be a good idea, get some experience helpin' the natural world and all, y'know? Just because I don' think he's a god doesn' mean I don' think he does good things, and that's what counts.
Why did *you* join?"

Cazwell sighed softly and shook his head. "Chasing an impossible dream."

Book VII Ch 9: Little Red Labcoat

Cathedral of a Thousand Roses
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

"Hahahahahahahhahah, TOO SLOW!" Reks squealed triumphantly, dropping back onto the palms of her hands before spinning acrobatically out of the way of Na'than's powerful swing.
She bounced back again at once, catching his arm between her legs and whirling aside to yank him to the floor, but he turned gracefully with her, tumbling along the floor, breaking free and following up with a flurry of wicked jabs.

Reks caught each blow in a swiftly-raised palm, then countered with a vicious kick aimed at the taller *Aeneski's* face.
He dipped beneath her foot at the last moment, grabbing it in one hand, and then neatly snatching up the other as she attempted to launch herself away. "Too slow for *who?*"
Na'th and Reks exchanged grins, panting for breath. "I think that's a point for me."
"Yeah, yeah. Lemme down!"
Wriggling like a fish, Reks dropped onto the floor with a squeak. "Damn, kid, you're getting good! Well, sorta."
Na'than was cheerfully indignant. "*Sorta?*"
"Yup, sorta. I went easy on you!"
"Pfft, liar!"

Settling on his knees beside Reks, Na'th reached over to ruffle her hair. "What have you been up to in all this time, anyway?
I missed you, bratface."
Reks scrunched her nose. "I do not have a brat face.
Ennyway, you know me! Huntin' stuff, skinnin' stuff, makin' awesomesaurs. Just bein' Reks, that's all."
Na'than tilted his head. "Pilisse is a pretty name, you know. You should totally use it more often."

Reks' eyes grew huge.

"Oh my god, what's wrong with you?! Ugh. It's so *serious*. You know I *hate* being serious.
I'll have all the time in the world for that crap... eventually," she said, her voice softening.

"Stick with Reks, okay? Or *imma cut you*."

Na'th glanced away, cowed. "...Oh. I hadn't even thought of... I don't-- listen, when it--"
"Shh, don't even mention that. It's never gonna happen, okay?"
"Yeah."

Satisfied, Reks immediately brightened again. "So hey, what've *you* been doin'? I talked to your super-cool robot guy! He's funny."
"Oh, Leo? Yeah, the Master made me Chief Engineer a while ago.
I build a bunch of stuff now, and I take care of the lapsworgn when I'm not. I make robots and mad science machines and stuff, and fix zeppelins sometimes. It's cool."
"I want a zeppelin. Na'th, you should make me one! I can get the leather!"
"Well..."
A sudden crash shook the foundations of the Cathedral, startling both elves.

"Holy carp, what was that?!" Reks cried.
As she and Na'than exchanged concerned glances, a low, pained howl sounded, followed by another solid thud.
"We're going to the sec labs, Reks," Na'than announced, leaping to his feet and grabbing her hand.

"*Now!*"

"You've done more than enough bullshit "research", you asshole," Eva snarled between clenched teeth as she slowly rose to her knees.
"I must beg to differ," said Anom.
"You're such an obedient lab animal--and besides, I have a new study for you to help with." Anom's double voice echoed against the secure laboratory's walls.
Reinforced with several inches of solid steel, and sealed tight with a specially manufactured diamondglass door, few creatures on the planet would manage to enter or leave the room without a key.
Created for high-ranking Docs to perform dangerous tests within, they were well suited for Anom's purposes-- all the better that as a Houselord, he had full access.

Eva felt bile rise in her throat as the enormous leupak withdrew his spectral arms, clutching the Scepter of Voghn.
"I think you'd enjoy a few field studies, no? Get out, enjoy some fresh air for a bit? I'm curious about the inhabitants of the smaller settlements near Laps; how they manage to shelter themselves against the creatures of the Wilds, what their village defenses are like.

"Oh, yes-- and also how they taste." Anom licked his lower lip with a cobra-shaped tongueclaw.
"*What?!*

There's no way that isn't against SRO protocol-- and even if I'm wrong, like *hell* am I attacking a town for you, let alone..!"
Anom meaningfully tapped the Sceptre against his empty palm.
"You will-- and protocol matters little if no one hears of a breach. Haven't you learned by now?
All leupaks serving the Organization are given a monthly ration of meat and blood. It is...adequate, but little suits my tastes.
I have had enough of cloned flesh, and you have thus far served useful for only minor tasks.

Today, I will test the limits of this artifact. Don't let me down, little pup." The leupak pointed the sceptre at Eva, and her limbs grew heavy and tight, her pulse quickening.
A wave of sudden fury and hatred washed over her, and she struggled to rise to her feet, teeth clenched painfully tight.
"N..no. I've had enough of your *bullshit*, you stinking, sand-bloated gecko. I'm going to--"
"Save it, darling," Anom snorted. "I've heard enough of the sweet whisperings of lycanthropes already, and I hardly care.
Frankly, Na'than's rages against the Father are far more entertaining..."

But as Eva transformed before him, thrashing and rolling in pain across the laboratory floor, the sceptre grew hot in Anom's ghostly hands.
"Ah, what is this?" He rose an eyebrow, carefully examining the artifact. "This has never occurred before..."

Who are you, drawing from my power as though you have any claim to it? came an odd, silky voice deep within Anom's mind.
You are the one creating false varworgn, aren't you? I would quite like to meet you, stranger!

Suddenly, the sceptre burned with ferocious heat.

With a shriek of pain and shock, Anom hurled the offending artifact across the room; it collided with the floor and burst into a hundred tiny shards, crackling with dissipating energy.
"Dreamwaker damn it!" Anom snarled, gazing at his scarred hands. "Was it somehow cursed? Or..."

Eva the varworg slammed into the Houselord with enough force to throw him off of his feet and into the nearby wall, her eyes full of murderous rage.

"What is that noise?! Geez!" Reks complained, clapping her hands over her ears as she ran alongside Na'than down countless corridors and stairs to their destination.
"I have an inkling-- but I'm praying I'm wrong," Na'th said between breaths.
They raced around a final corner and down a dimly-lit hallway full of huge glass-and-metal doors spaced far apart from one another.

Pricking his ears up, Na'than chose one and reached into his work shirt, revealing a large, jewel-cut chunk of miracrystal hung from a thick chain by a tiny golden boralion. Reks looked on with wide, curious eyes as the silver-haired elf carefully slid it into a slot in the door and turned it like a key, releasing the lock with several loud clicks.
The door split open and slid apart into the frame, opening into a large laboratory-- empty save for a furious black werewolf and the six-limbed leupak it was thrashing against the wall.

"Woaaah," Reks gasped, moving to head inside.
Na'than gently placed his hand on her shoulder and shook his head.
Lifting her head, Eva paused for a moment to gaze over at the newcomers, her claws and muzzle slick with ichor.

She woofed deeply, shook her mane, then returned to her victim-- who took the moment's lapse to hurl her across the room.

Anom rose shakily to his feet, dripping blood and venom from multiple gashes across his face and chest.
With a ferocious bellow, he charged after Eva, who leapt forward to collide with him again, all too eager to finish the job she had begun.

Now, Na'than ran into the room, pressing between the two enormous beasts and prying them apart.
Holding each steady with a single, strained arm and a great deal of effort, he drew in a breath.

"STOP THIS IDIOCY, BOTH OF YOU!" he thundered, and leupak and werewolf both fell silent, staring down at him in shock.

"That's better.
Eva, get to a medic, and then go home. I'll come and check on you when I'm finished here."
The shaggy black beast nuzzled Na'than's cheek, then dropped down upon all fours and shot Anom a venomous glare before galloping past Reks and out of the laboratory, dripping blood as she went.

Anom sighed, attempting in vain to regain his composure.
"Thank you, Mister Silvermane.
That dog has been giving me trouble since it was first shipped in. How did you know her name?"
"We're dating," Na'than said disgustedly, glaring at him.

"...*Oh*. Ah, I've--"
"Shut up, Anom.
I've heard plenty, and I have a feeling both I and the Lord-Doctor will have plenty to see on the cameras, as well.
You can inform him of any comments you'd like to make when the time comes."

"Na'th?" Reks slipped into the room, peering curiously at the mess on the floor.
"In a minute, Reks. I just want to make sure this asshole understands that he's gone way over the line.
Well, Houselord? I think this is grounds for suspension at the very least, myself."
"That was Eva, Na'th?" She peered up at Anom, frowning. "Ooooh, I'm telliiiing!"

Anom glanced quietly down at the hooded aeneski... and then abruptly took several steps back, his mild embarassment transforming into an expression of horror.
"Don't worry, Reks. I'm telling, too. I think he gets it now, huh? Let's go."

Reks grinned.

"Actually... you go ahead and check on Eva, Na'th. I wanna have a... well, a *talk* with him first. Kay?"

Anom bowed his head and sat down in silence, trembling faintly.
Na'than frowned. "Are you sure? I'd really hate for him to hurt you too, Reks.

You *are* strong, but he's pretty big, and Houselords are dangerous."
"I'm sure!

Besides," Reks added brightly, "I'm not the one who's scared!"

Book VII Ch 10: Miracle Maker

Elliot's Office
Carl Christoph Museum of Science and History
Gier, South Dreamsong

"I don't get it.

Silisk... Silisk *love* manual labor! On strike because something scared them in the miracrystal mines.
What's possibly frightening enough to convince a bunch of eight foot tall musclebeasts to throw down their picks?" Grey lamented, chewing on his pipe as he paged through the Dreamsong Gazette.

" Thanks to this little stunt of theirs, shards are going at a premium in Dreamsong right now, and you *know* the Sorilians want top dollar for theirs... *Ugh!*"

Elliot merely sighed in response, dazedly staring at the letter she held in her lap. Marked with the official seal of the Firestarters, it had been penned in an elegant, looping hand.

Dear Elliot,

I'm sorry I haven't returned any of your messages for a while. You're probably worried sick about me now, but I'm okay-- well, as okay as I'll ever be, I think.

I realized there was nothing anyone else could do for me, so I've joined the Firestarters. I'm doing good work with them now. Hopefully someday no one will have to worry about what happened to me happening to them, too. I can't really tell you the details, though.

I love you, and I'm sorry about wasting so much of the family money trying to get that surgery done. I hate that I ended up funding the SRO by being stupid.

I don't have a lodica anymore, so I had someone write this letter for me. Firestarters protocol and all, you know.

Talk to you soon.

- Caz

"Woah, what's that?" Grey asked loudly. "Hand-written letter? *Geez Louise*. Some pyro send it or something?"
"Yeah, *some pyro*. My brother's gone and joined them somehow," Elliot murmured.
"Woah, congrats for him. Not that I care much for 'em and all, but... well, you know.

Wait, *somehow?* Is it that tough getting in?"

Elliot smiled wryly. "For leupaks, it is."
Grey rose an eybrow. "Come again?"
Folding the letter, Elliot tucked it back into its envelope and slid it onto her desk.
"Cazwell was transformed a while ago.
He's been trying to find a way to become human again, and the more desperate he's become, the more he's distanced himself from me.
He's done some frightening things, but maybe the Firestarters will take good care of him. I can't believe they'd let a leupak in, but maybe it's because he's a venomborne.

"Still..." she bit her lip. "I feel like I'm losing my little brother too, now.
I don't know how I'm going to keep carrying on when it seems like everyone I'm closest to is vanishing before my eyes, right when I need them the most."

Grey reached over to pat Elliot's shoulder heartily. "Don't be so down in the dumps, huh, babe? I dunno how old your brother is, but it sounds like he's found a place to find himself and get all sorted out. And you know I'm happy to give you all the support you need, yeah? As long as MIRACLE's going strong, your Somnambulists've got nothing to worry about!"

"I knew I should've kept my feelings to myself," Elliot suddenly snapped, pushing her glasses up upon her nose as she scowled.

"This isn't about the Somnambulists or funding. It's about *me* and how *I* feel, Grey.
One of my best friends has been murdered, my brother's out there trying to get himself killed, and you've been strutting around here all

puffed up and trying to win my affections for longer than I can keep track of.

The Somnambulist Project can take care of itself. *Me?* I'm not made of stone. I want my friend back. I want a shoulder to cry on.
I don't want a damn *boyfriend*."

Grey was taken aback. "Gracious, Elliot, I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by that..."
He sighed, taking his pipe out of his mouth. "Listen, I don't know much about how to soothe anyone while they're hurting. I'm a simple kinda guy.
I just want to make sure you don't lose track of anything that needs seen to while you're grieving.
I know Selarion helped fund your projects, and I don't want you to have to sacrifice more of yourself just to keep everything going."

Elliot looked up at him through wet eyes. "I'm sorry, Grey. I shouldnt've--"
"Hey. *Hey*, it's alright, alright? You've got a lot to deal with. Anything I can do to help lighten your load, I'm here. I'm not good at sentimentality or any of that, but I believe in what you do, and I want you to keep doing it, too.
MIRACLE's set. We've got government backing now ever since the Defenders drove off those crazy dragons, and funds coming out our ears, too, thanks to the Dreamwaker pestering me nightly about how I aughta try using miracrystal as an energy source..."

Grey stopped speaking abruptly and laughed, scratching the back of his head as Elliot eyed him.
"Um, I don't think I was supposed to tell anyone that part. *Whoops!*"
"No... no, it's alright, Grey.
What do you mean, 'pestering you nightly'? Do you have... the *dreams*?"

Heading for a nearby window, Grey puffed on his pipe. "I care for you, Elliot. A lot.
But if I haven't already doomed myself, explaining will really do me in, I bet..."

Elliot reached over to squeeze his hand. "It's okay. He wouldn't hurt you... he visits *me* in dreams all the time."

"Alright, alright." He sighed.
"Back when I first started experimenting with automatons, I spent a long time trying to find a suitable energy source to get them running and keep them small.
One night, he came to me in my dreams and told me to get some crystals. I thought he was mad, really, but eventually I got curious enough to give it a shot. That morning when I woke up, there was a shard just sitting on my nightstand, out of nowhere.
Later that year, I made the first prototype varanius."

"I know it's probably like... unfair to everyone else, I guess," Grey admitted, "but every now and then, he comes and helps me out when I'm making hard decisions, or when I'm wondering where to take the company next.
Those coal barons hate my guts something fierce; I wouldn't be surprised if they suspected foul play from me somehow, and I can't say I blame 'em, either.

"Seeing what mirajin energy has done for the advancement of science, and making life better for everybody, though... y'know, if I had told him no, he probably would've just tipped someone else off and it would've been done eventually anyway.

"I'm just glad he chose me, and yeah... I don't *really* regret agreeing, you know?"

Elliot wondered quietly what would have become of her, had she ever accepted the Dreamwaker's offer.
"He probably had multiple reasons for doing it, and even for choosing you in particular," she said carefully.
"But I can't deny that it's had countless benefits for Valenth, and opened up new avenues for science.
At the same time, though... *why?*
Would he do something like that just for the sake of science, or the sake of a civilization that excludes his people and views him with suspicion and fear? I don't know."
"I dunno, Elliot," Grey admitted. "But it's been done, and here we are.

Enough about *me*, though... If you see him, too, why don't you try asking him what Cazwell's up to? He is your brother, and he *is* a leupak. I bet the Dreamwaker knows."

"That's probably a good idea. He did say I can call for him whenever I need him." Elliot scratched her cheek.
"Good girl.
Anyway, if you don't mind me asking, what does he talk to you about?" Grey asked. "Did he inspire you to found the Sommies, too?"

"No," Elliot said softly, glancing at Cazwell's letter on the desk. "Not exactly."

Book VII Ch 11: Echo

Faerwethr Swamp
North Dreamsong

"I just don't understand why they wanted to send me out here," Cazwell complained, wading through the sticky mud with displeasure as it sucked at his toes. "Leupaks don't live in miracrystal mines, do they?"
"Nah," Harley shook her head, trudging playfully backwards up the swamp beside him. "Least, not normally. Miracrystal mines're usually old dragon tunnels.
It's in the name, though-- raw miracrystal's full of mirajin. If they send a leupak to check it out, they don' hafta risk getting anyone hurt, 'cause it's a part of who ya are!"

The little brown leupak frowned. "Don't say that. Anyway, what about you? Are silisks safe from it, then?"
"I dunno, I guess so. Lotsa my folks work in the mines, and we've never really come out funny or anything. They're just crystals to us-- valuable crystals, too, so even better.
Mining's boring, though, so I went down to Gier and became a bouncer instead." Harley grinned. "At least, until the band came 'round, then I started banging on drums instead of people!"

Cazwell paused, considering her for a moment.
"I always forget about that. You don't look like a rocker, Harley."
"Well, I guess I do. I am one, after all!" She laughed.

They made their way out of the swamp, treading down a well-worn, leaf-strewn path into the deeper woodlands. Harley whistled as they walked, arms folded behind her head.
"Man, it's been way too long since I've been in the swamp. Good, soft mud between yer toes... nothin' like it."
Caz looked at the muck coating his paw and shuddered. "Anyway, what if we do find something in here? What do we do then?"
"Dunno. Talk to it, mebbe rough it up a bit if it's somethin' unfriendly. Seems to be how this stuff goes down.
I'm sure it'll be nothing. We can drop by Faerwethr after for a nice hot meal, and then be back on our way to camp again!
Looks like we're here, too," Harley noted, stopping in front of a moldy-looking wooden shed jutting out of the muddy earth.
"That's it?" Cazwell was unimpressed. "It looks like an oversized outhouse."
"S'only the entrance.
Since the swamp's all muddy, you don't want the way into the caves ta collapse after a good rain. Once we get a lil' way in, though, it's all solid rock."
"Ummm. Ladies first," the leupak murmured sheepishly.
The pair made their way into the mine, carefully descending the rickety ladders and narrow passageways into the main tunnel.

Cazwell, breathed a gentle voice from the dark.
"What?
Harley, did you--?"
"Eh? Nah, I didn' say anythin'. Keep yer wits, eh? We're only just gettin' into the main tunnel.
Stay close-- it's easy ta get turned around if yer not used to bein' in places like this."

Caz laid his ears back flat and crept through the tunnel after her.

The mine was little more than a series of wide, rocky caverns dotted with tiny flecks of pink crystal and enormous grooves dug into the walls and floors.
Cazwell swore he could feel his scales tingling as he continued deeper down beside the ever-cheerful Harley.

After a long stretch of empty tunnels, suddenly the paths began to glow with an eerie violet light. Up ahead, the bare stone walls transformed into a forest of rough crystal dripping down from all sides.
The two reptiles paused to blink, letting their eyes adjust to the sudden light.

"S'been a while. Beautiful, ain't it?
I loved sneakin' down the mines as a kid..." Harley breathed, gently tracing her blunt fingernails over a chunk of miracrystal.
"Y'don't get to see this stuff like this anywhere else... they say it's dangerous, yeah, but it never bothered *us* any."
Cazwell shook his head slowly. "I don't think I'd ever come down here as a human. I'd probably leave with an extra eye."

"Oh, pfah. I bet it's just talk," Harley laughed.
"You ever known any mutants? Only one I've ever seen in my whole life was Cami, and she's not all that different. Just pale, and kinna hard when ya touch 'er, like one a' them dolls."
"There are lots in Chimre," Caz said, but he couldn't remember having seen any obvious ones.
"Yeah, I guess so," Harley mused.
"Man, it must be amazing out there... they say everything's made outta crystal, even the trees. Is it true? We never get to go look around when we're on tour."

Cazwell was unamused. "Aren't you a Firestarter?"
"Yeah, but that doesn't mean I can't appreciate beauty when I see it. I don't have anythin' against mirajin, or the people who use it or anythin' else like that.
One of my best friends is a mutant, and another one of 'em loves 'em, porcelain skin an' all. Who am I to judge?
I don't understand why bein' a cute lil' leupak makes you want to kill other ones, but I can't pretend to know what it's like to turn into something else, either."

Cazwell, came the voice again, echoing from the nearby miracrystals.
Come here.

Come closer.

"Harley, I think I'm hearing things," he said, glancing nervously over his shoulder.
"I heard it too," Harley noted, rushing farther into the tunnel. "Sounded like something scattering rocks around!"
"No, not up th-- oh, Flamekeeper *damn it*," Caz sighed, chasing after her.
Suddenly Harley stopped dead in her tracks, putting a hand out to keep Cazwell from advancing ahead of her.
Just ahead, the tunnel opened up into an enormous round room, studded with large, shining peaks of miracrystal along the walls.

"Caz.
Caz, look up," Harley whispered, and he did.
Where the ceiling of the cavern should have been was the open sky, glowing a million colors and speckled with bright stars.
"...what is it? How is this here?" he asked, hesitantly taking a step forward.
He felt the blood rushing into his face; it was suddenly incredibly difficult for him to resist throwing himself upon the miracrystals and climbing up into the alien world above.

Cazwell, come here.

Come to me... the voice said to him, vibrating in his mind.

"Who's there? I don't know how to--"

Suddenly, three huge, hateful green eyes were staring back at him from the aetherhole, looking down from a massive and white-scaled face.
Its mouth was lined with jagged teeth taller than he was long, black lips cutting across its face and down over its fleshy shoulders.
A thousand swirling, striped red and white tentacles danced around its horrible visage, reaching out to him, their tips brushing the air just inches away from his face.

Cazwell began to back away, but he had the sinking feeling that there was no escape.

Nothing could save him from the towering beast-- there was no distance he could run to flee it.

I told you what to do, it whispered to him.
I gave you everything you needed, and still you defy me.
"No! No, I don't know you!
I don't know what you want!" Cazwell cried, terror icing through him.

It is too late to turn back now, the monster said, the largest of its three eyes seeming to stare into his soul.
It is my blood you have on your hands, slayer. You live and breathe at my mercy.

For now.

"*Cazwell!*

Cazwell, snap out of it!" Harley shouted, giving him a gentle-- by her qualifications-- thump on the nose.
"*NOOOOO!*" He wailed, leaping backwards.
The silisk woman threw her arms around his neck and held him still, gently stroking his head.
"Oh, Cazwell. Are ya alright? I showed ya the ceiling, and then ya broke down and started babblin' all sortsa nonsense!"
"Didn't you see it?! It was... it was, I *don't know what it was!*" Cazwell exclaimed, tears in his eyes.

"It had tentacles and a mouth *this wide* and a million teeth and three eyes like this and just *its face* was as big as the whole cave and and, *oh gods*, that can't have been the Dreamwaker--"
"Calm down, Caz. It's okay. There's nobody here, and I dunno whatcha saw.
I thought the Dreamwaker was just a lil' elf?" Harley tilted her head. "I've never even heard'a anything like that!"
"I think... I think it was a leupak.
It had to have been a leupak, but I've never seen...
I'm *so scared*, Harl. I can't... I can't stop shaking. *I think it knows*--"

"Who are ye?"

Harley and Cazwell looked up to realize they were surrounded by short, cloaked figures, each holding crystalline knives and swords.
"Oh!" Harley said brightly. "Hullo there! Do you live here?"
"Who are ye?" one of the creatures asked again, gruffly.
"Y'shouldn't be here. No one should be here. *Get out.*"
"Don't worry! We were only coming to check and see why the other silisk ran away. Was it you?" she asked, unfazed.
"Harley," Cazwell whispered, "maybe we should go. I--"
A second cloaked figured turned to stare at him with deep black eyes.
"Ye've peeved off th' spirits. I heard 'em whisper, and ye need t'get the hell out."

The others began to chatter incessantly amongst one another, shaking their heads and gesturing at Cazwell all the while.
One creature's hood slid off of its head, revealing strange, crystal-studded hair, a round face and small, folded ears. It swore, quickly replacing the hood with a nervous glance towards Cazwell and Harley before continuing its frantic conversation with the others..

"What *are they?*" Caz asked softly, his terror growing again. "It looked like it's got miracrystal growing all over it...
Are they--"
"OI!" Harley shouted; Cazwell and the creatures all fell silent, staring at her.
"What's all this, then? And who're ya?"

"I'll say it again, swampwalker," their apparent leader grumbled. "Yer not welcome here, and yer friend's made enemies in high places.
We hear the crystals talkin', and we don' wantcha here. So get, or they won't hafta concern themselves with you anymore..."
The others cheered in agreement, waving their weapons threateningly.
"Alright... Caz, back up a bit, hon," the silisk said, taking a step closer to the little people.
"What're you gonna--"

Harley took a deep breath, clenched her fists, and *roared*; the sound echoed off of the miracrystals and the cavern walls, ringing Cazwell's ears painfully.

Without another word, the hooded creatures scattered, fleeing into the deeper tunnels.

"Yeah," Harley said smugly. "I didn't think so.

C'mon, Caz. Let's go home-- nothin's gonna bother us now."

Book VII Ch 12: Buck Buck Buck

Faerwethr Swamp
North Dreamsong

The Cockatrice is a peculiar and rare magical beast-- the result of a basilisk hatching the egg of a bird.

Researchers and alchemists alike are not quite certain how such an thing comes about; best guests include the clumsy creatures somehow managing to smash the nests of ground-laying avians under their tails as they move throughout the swamps.

Nonetheless, cockatrice exist due to no fault of any sentient creature, wandering the swamps and marshes of Valenth. The absurd-looking beasts wander the land, seemingly for interesting people or things to pester.
Cockatrice are surprisingly friendly, often following creatures they find fascinating for days at a time, attempting to perch atop them, climb into parcels and packs, or simply being a nuisance for the sake of attention.

Unfortunately, cockatrice are relatives of the deadly basilisk, and have inherited the multi-limbed reptiles' worse traits. Looking into the eye of a cockatrice is said to slay a person in an instant, and its meat is similarly dangerous to eat.

Cockatrice often kill people by mistake, most often as a result of their good-natured bumbling. The beasts seem intelligent enough to realize they are at fault, as such fatalities usually result in a panicked and guilty cockatrice fleeing the premeses, clucking and flailing about.

Gabriel adjusted his tinted goggles, looking away from his journal to watch several of the stripe-tailed fowl rustling and pecking about in the damp grass at his feet.
"You're really not what I was looking for out here," he laughed despite himself, reaching down to ruffle a bird's feathers.
"You can keep me company while I'm in the swamp, but I'll be leaving soon, and it's too dangerous for you to come with me."

The flock of cockatrice gazed up at him and clucked excitedly, their strange, x-shaped pupils pulsating eerily.

Book VII Ch 13: The General

The Flamekeeper's Cabin
The Firestarters' Campgrounds
Heaven's Pillar Forest, Aensdoun

"Violent change is on the winds, Dilndrou, and I care not for it," Kelan sighed, gazing down upon a deerskin map of Valenth with his reptilian advisor.
"I see it building up out of the corner of my eyes, and I fear we will be all but powerless when the storm arrives.

"The Eye of Elysia has been destroyed, and perverted into something that will ultimately make our task more difficult.
I did not understand its significance or power until I felt its loss.

The artifacts we've found in its wake still retrain traces of its vital power, but there's no way of knowing how long they'll survive-- or if it'll be enough to help us preserve Valenth."

Dilndrou simply nodded, pressing his hand to his chin. "Time is of the essence, Kelan. What do you intend to do?"

"I'm still uncertain, but in the meantime I'm gathering everyone I can think of who may provide assistance. The Court has naturally declined to aid us, despite the threat the Renatus Purifico pose to *everyone* on the planet.
I expected as much from them, but I've had scouts reading between the lines as well, and what they've found is... *curious*."
"Bastion's child remains an enigma-- as secretive and scheming as Nefirian, but she spurns her family as well, and to what end?
I understand her dragons have been vanishing as of late. Perhaps the courtesans are growing weary of impersonal Court protocol."
"I think the truth may be somewhat more incredible.
Reports from Firewing say courtesans have been slipping into Gier in quite large numbers, hoping to be missed among the shadows of the evening.
There is a particular building there which they seem to be attending meetings within-- meetings reportedly conducted by a flamboyant *Aeneski* known as Remy."

The Flamekeeper and the silisk exchanged glances.
"Were I you," Dilndrou murmured thoughtfully,"I would send a representative to meet this "Remy", and ask if he would be interested in an audience."
"Ireliss intends to do just that-- she's flown off to visit Firewing Camp and meet with our officials stationed there about the Renatus attacks.
Afterwards, she'll be having a look on my behalf."

Dilndrou looked pleased.
"Very good. Now, that unfortunately leaves--"
"Yes," Kelan sighed, frowning. "The matter of Nefirian.
Doctor's Ball fliers are beginning to circulate again. Last year, he successfully deflected me with Bastion's help, but this year... I *will* return, and I *must* get to the bottom of his current scheme and put an end to it. Dilndrou, if you were to attend with me, he'd have no choice but to submit."
"That would never work.
Nefirian would never allow me in, and furthermore, if he is truly allied with Artemio, he will ensure that security is tightened immensely this year.
Even if you attempted to go alone, you may find yourself in an undesirable situation."
"We can't simply allow him to carry on!
Even last year, the amount of malignant mirajin radiating from Laps-du-Ment was staggering. I sorely regret not having taken greater pains to intercept him then, but I wasn't expecting *Nigel*, or the events that happened afterward.

The magnitude of what he must have planned... I shudder to think--"
Dilndrou cleared his throat. "I said nothing of leaving him to *continue*.
If we attempt to take part in the Ball, we will draw attention to ourselves and our suspicion.
Instead, Kelan, we use his own diversion against him. Whatever he has planned isn't being held in Laps' ballroom, I'm certain.
We simply wait until Doctor's Ball is well underway, and then pay the city a visit... unannounced, and undetected."

"... you're right, Dilndrou.
With luck, perhaps we can find his project and destroy it before he so much as suspects--"
"Sir! Sir, please come quickly!"
A senior officer thrust her head into Kelan's tent, causing both men to raise their heads in alarm.
"What--"
"No time to explain. *Please!*"

As Kelan and Dilndrou followed the officer out into the brilliantly-lit outside world, shouts, worried murmurs and challenges barked in Aengoch and Logos rang their ears.

The trio broke into a steady jog, rushing to the outskirts of the camp.

They came to a screeching halt before thousands of *Aeneski* tribesmen, surrounding the camp on all sides with weapons held at the ready.

Kelan's face grew pale as more men trickled out of the thick forests and up from the plains, all eyes directed at the Firestarters encampment.

"It would appear that the Aen'och tribes have at last turned an eye upon us, " Dilndrou observed solemnly.

Book VII Ch 14: Thorn Prince

The Throne of the Third Eye
Bastille du Ment
Psyche, The Reverie

"This year... I will not be leaving Valenth to clutch," Nefirian said with some difficulty, leaning heavily back against the enormous throne to watch the tiny, sluglike leupaks scooting about at his feet. "I must finish what I have started, or I may never have the chance again."
Anderson Thorne nodded curtly, sitting on both knees before his lord and master-- *among other things.*
"Of course.
Everyone suspects you're up to something now-- it's a small blessing that the Court is preoccupied with its own affairs, and the Renatus are too poorly organized to be any real threat on their own. But if the Firestarters manage to regroup, we may as well kiss our *veselles* and *vitee ouwai*.
Especially with Dilndrou aiding them... you know he's got it out for you."
"Ugh, Dilndrou. Don't remind me," Nef muttered, waving his hand dismissively. "Dietrich is looking forward to catching up with him, at least.
How is your *vitee* anyhow, Andy? I'm impressed you've hung onto him for so long."
The Thorne Houselord grinned.
"He's still hanging in, just as whiny and melodramatic as ever.
But he's worth the trouble-- I like his face, and if he decided to kick it, I'd be out a career. You know how I like my pianos.
I'dve had him cloned, but I can't translate copied blood very well. It could be simply *catastrophic*," he said with a flip of the wrist. "Didier has too many mad fans-- if a single feature was the slightest bit off... could you *imagine* the scandal?"
"Even so, he won't last forever. Soft-skinned fae never do.
Be careful-- you have been stockpiling his blood in case of any unforseen events, yes?"
Andy sighed. "Yes, yes, of course. But enough about me. Speaking of unforseen events, have you chosen your heir yet?
Lyric wants nothing to do with the Organization and is a dragon besides, and I'm poorly suited for clutching-- it'd be a crying shame for us to lose our head of covert operations, yes?
As for Na'than, bless his sweet little heart, he's completely out of the running now that you've made a lapdog of him," he laughed.
"More's the pity-- he'dve made a *beautiful* leupak, and a shot of miratotoxin or two would've taken care of the lack of a facet...
You've got plenty of failsafes and protection set up for us, but what happens if something happens to you?
Who are we answering to, then?"

The throne room fell silent.

"Will you perform at the ball for me this year, "Didier"?" Nef asked softly.
"Of course I will, you bloated, slippery bastard."
"Come now, Ander. Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?"
"When he gets over playing *Aeneski* for all the *sibans* and remembers he's a leupak again, sure.
What, do you want a kiss, *mom?*"
"*Playing Aeneski*, huh? Well, aren't you the little hypocrite, ser doppelganger.
Maybe I'll just eat you, instead. I can always make another houselord..." Nef grinned sharply, running a striped tongue along his lips.

"*What!?* I'm your son! *I'm irreplaceable!* Don't give me that bullshit--"

The Dreamwaker started to laugh. "C'mere, you."

Book VII Ch 15: White on White

The Silent Garden
Psyche, The Reverie

Here I am, Elliot thought, wrapping her arms tightly around herself to fend off the biting cold of the shining white landscape surrounding her.

She had never come here on her own before; that her attempt had gone so smoothly seemed to bode well.

On the other hand... now that she had arrived, she was uncertain how to reach *him*.

Just as she began to doubt her plan, a great blast of wind whipped thousands of rosepetals up into the air around her.
Stumbling over the slippery ground to try and stay on her feet, she tumbled onto her knees as an enormous shadow washed over her.

The White Boralion landed with massive force just a few meters in front of her, its three eyes blazing with anger and intent.

This was *not* what she'd had in mind.
"N-n-n-*nefirian?*" was all Elliot could manage, trembling in the wake of the legendary beast standing before her.
"You're frightened," he noted. "We apologize for coming to you this way... but we have little time.
Elliot, your brother has placed us in a very precarious situation--"
"Cazwell? I w-wanted to ask you about him," she said cautiously, raising an eyebrow at the strange way he spoke. "Is he alright?"

The great leupak fell silent for a moment, dropping down onto all fours to look closely at her. The energy wafting from the beast's scales tickled her nose and made her hair stand on end; that the little freckle-faced *Aeneski* she had met with so many times before had hidden such a thing within himself filled her drowsy mind with questions.

What could have been going on to cause him to take such a form now? What else was the Dreamwaker capable of-- in *either world?*

And was *this* his true guise?

"Elliot," he said softly. "Your brother, we fear, has elected to become a leupak slayer.
We cannot abide this... In the face of all we have done to help, it is the *highest* of insults to ourselves. To kill our people in cold blood, without meaning or purpose beyond hollow vengeance...
And, in the interest of full disclosure... were he anyone else, we would have punished him utterly the moment his intent became clear."
The monster's three eyes glowed brightly as it stared at her, green and pink reflecting in the snowy white petals.

"*Cazwell?*
I-- are you sure it's him? With... with the utmost respect, Ne--... *Dreamwaker*," she corrected herself quickly, fighting back a shiver, "Caz has never been the sort of person to ever harm a soul, let alone--"

Elliot's words died in her throat as the white world melted away around her.

She saw Cazwell, draped in green and gold and sticky with blood as he leaned over the corpse of another leupak in the deep wood.
She saw him, tearing through the throat of another with sharpened metal claws, his face a mask of rage and hatred she had never believed possible in him-- flaying a leupak he had never seen before as though it had been the one to change him.

In the lifelike vision playing before her eyes, she watched her brother kill, hiding the corpse in the murky waters of a nearby river and washing his hands clean before hurrying away into the night.

"Cazwell," she murmured, her voice weak.

"You can't-- they're *people*.
You *can't*..."

And the visions were gone.
Overwhelmed, Elliot sank into the cold, soft petals in silence.

"We cannot blame the Firestarters for this.
He indeed kills on their behalf, to protect others from feral leupaks who have become clumsy in their manners... but he kills for himself as well, for his own peace of mind.
"But he is your brother," the White Boralion added.

"He is my brother," Elliot agreed softly. "But what do you mean?
As much as I care for him, I am not his keeper... what would you have me do? He rejected my help as well as yours."
"He is your brother," the beast continued, "and so we have not acted against him... *yet*.
He murders our people-- people who have too few safe places in this world to go already. We hesitate only because we do not wish to hurt you.
What would you have us do, Elliot? We must protect our people."
"What would I
?

I can't pass judgement on *my own brother,* Nefirian!" Elliot said, horrified.
"I condemn what he does, and we have our own laws for dealing with murderers--"
"But in your laws, he is not a murderer. Your laws protect *sibans*-- legal "people".
Leupaks are *monsters*-- they would never acknowledge him as having done anything wrong."
"That's not--!" Elliot hung her head solemnly.
"Nefirian, you're a leupak. I know that, anyone with two brain cells to rub together knows that.
But you're obviously a person too, or else you wouldn't have feelings to care about your people, or what's happening to them, or even to care about me or try to help Cazwell.
And even Caz... once he turned, he didn't magically stop caring about me, or become a soulless animal!"
"We are not a person, Elliot," he said with a mirthless smile. "We are just *exceptionally good at pretending to be*."
"I don't believe that's true."

The white boralion spread his wings and arched his neck towards the sky; both seemed to stretch on forever, threatening to smother and pierce the clouds.

"'People' do, Elliot.
And the laws of 'people' protect them when the monsters come out, whether they are beasts or neighbors... so why should they ever see a need to change them?
Tell us what we are to do, Elliot.
Tell us, or tell us we are free to act as we see fit to protect our children. No one else will protect them.
No one else will *mourn them*..."

"I don't know," Elliot said.
But the great beast was already gone, dissolving into the air like smoke.

The rosepetals shuddered in the fading wind and grew still, and Elliot lay cold and alone in the pristine dreamscape.

Book VII Holiday Special - Let The Ball Commence!

Laps-du-Ment's grand ballroom flooded with people as the lights dimmed, excited and hushed voices alike buzzing across the floor and from tables and stalls.

A single figure made its way across the stage floor, balancing with great care on shining gold-on-white heels, all ruffles and frills and gems and shimmering wings.
It paused at last before the microphone, spinning with a flourish of gauzy fabric, and smiled almost ferociously.
"Ladies, gentlemen, neither, both, people, monsters... *friends*.
We are delighted to announce that this year's Doctor's Ball has now begun," Nefirian announced in a calm and even tone.

"So you had damn well better get out there and ENJOY YOURSELVES!!"
Folding his arms across his ruffled chest as his wings bounced from the aftershock of his bellow, he watched approvingly as the crowd erupted with cheers and applause.
"Go on, then-- mingle, visit the stalls, meet a nice leupak or two and eat your fill.

As always, we will be delighted to entertain you throughout the duration of the Ball-- our dear friend Didier is here on piano," he announced, gesturing as the blue-haired *Aeneski* waved.
"*But!*" the Dreamwaker added.

"We have a special surprise for you all this year, as well. We would love for you to meet *another* close friend of ours."
He strode across the stage again, removing a gleaming white guitar from behind the curtains, decorated with six swan's wings.
Slipping it over his shoulder, he exchanged a playful nod with the pianist and laughed.

"This here is our lovely lady, *Swansong*. We do hope you enjoy her voice.
Happy Doctor's Ball, everyone!"

And tossing his hair away from his face, he and Didier began to play.

Book VII Holiday Special - The Dreamwaker's Waltz!

The lights grew dim as the dance floor cleared and the music grew still; the crowd cheered and applauded, watching excitedly as Didier made his way to the microphone.
"Welcome to the Doctor's Ball, everyone-- I do hope you have been enjoying the festivities.

We have a very special treat for you tonight; this year, we are going to be doing something a little different.

I will be leading a little orchestral piece here in just a moment, and our very own Lord-Doctor him--or is that *it?*-- self will be taking to the dance floor to waltz with anyone who dares accept his invitation.

Please, if he offers you anything strange, have it checked at one of our safety booths *before* you try to eat it," he grinned, glancing playfully over his shoulder.
"And please don't trod on his shoes; he's been going on about the things since he had them made a few weeks ago, and I'm sure it would break his heart!
All jokes aside; we are delighted to present to you the Dreamwaker's Waltz. I hope you enjoy it-- thank you."

Didier bowed fluidly before taking his seat at the piano again, setting up his music along with the orchestra as the audience applauded once more.
An oddly-shaped figure shuffled hurriedly in from behind a curtain, wielding a set of mallets as it made its way into the orchestra pit and came to rest before the vibraphone.
Reks peered out of the mouth of a toothy dinosaur hood and grinned brightly, covering her eyes to look out into the ballroom.

The music began to play hard and loud, and Nefirian made his way out onto the floor in full regalia, stepping gracefully in time with the music -- in apparent defiance of his tall heels.
As the song began to pick up, he plucked an onlooker from the audience and began to dance and sway with them, staring intensely into their eyes and whispering something softly to them.
After a few moments, he spun away again, choosing a new dancing partner and keeping the beat perfectly all the while.
He laughed loudly and grinned hard, his teeth threatening to split his face in two, and his companion gave a surprised shout.

On the side of the dance floor, Giovan Giers picked at his white suit, chatting cooly with a reporter who had approached him for an interview.

"So, uh, what is your costume exactly, Mr. Giers?"
Gio laughed and shook his head, adjusting his glasses. "I'm *That Guy*. You know the one."

Reks began to play a different tune on her instrument while no one was paying attention. Immediately, Nef stopped mid-spin and shot her a death glare over his shoulder.
With a sheepish grin, the dinosaur-clad Aeneski cleared her throat and returned to the sheet music.

"Um... nevermind. Anyway, are we going to be seeing the Glass Marionette at the Ball this year?"
"No way. Absolutely not. They've got studio junk to do and all that. There's going to be a tour next year, so they're working hard at finalizing a new album, and--"
The reporter frowned slightly. "But Didier is here, Mr. Giers."

"...*non-piano-related studio junk*. Don't give me any lip, please, I *am* the studio manager."
The reporter sighed and shook her head.
"Anyway, what do you think of the Dreamwaker's Waltz this year? Do you think the Dreamwaker seems a bit... on edge?"

Both of them paused to watch the Dreamwaker out on the floor; he spun his current dancing partner, his third eye bursting forth from his forehead to eye them appraisingly.
The man was a good sport, laughing nervously and continuing to dance for his few moments before making a hasty retreat.
"Don't be *ridiculous*," Gio said at last, rolling his eyes and remaining perfectly straight-faced. "No one's more cool and composed than our darling Lord-Doctor.
Look at him out there, rocking those high heels and ruffles like a freakin' boss. Woo!"
"Dr. Giovan Giers, Head Reasearcher of Splitcha Psionics and Manager and CEO of Galvanized Records.
I can't wait to see what they'll have in store for us in the next year, especially with albums on the way from Glass Marionette and superstar leupak guitarist Reggie English.

Have a wonderful evening, everyone!"

Book VII Holiday Special - The Unwelcome Visitors

Kelan gritted his teeth as he traveled through Chimre's crystalline forests with Dilndrou close at hand. The area's ambient mirajin pounded at him with such force that he wondered if his old friend had found a way to breathe life into the essence itself.
"This is bad," he gasped, pausing to lean against a tree and rest.
"Dilndrou, it... I don't know how long I can stay here. It's going to break through my defenses."
Tears of pain welled in his eyes, transforming into tiny crystals as they rolled down his cheeks and into the brittle leaf litter atop the soil.
He felt the mirajin nibbling away at the vital aura that surrounded him, threatening to suck out his soul.
Last year, it had been oppressive; now, he was *drowning in it*, and he wanted nothing more than to hurl himself through the brush to find the source and destroy it at all costs.

Such a thing would be an act of war in the Dreamwaker's lands, but Kelan wasn't entirely certain whatever he was doing wouldn't end in the same, anyway.
"Make them stronger," Dilndrou commanded. "You must not let your apprehension drain your strength. Focus!"
"I can't strengthen it, Dilndrou. There's no vitae here for me to--"
A flock of shining white birds exploded from the trees, rising into the air with great force before landing on the trees and earth in a surrounding circle, golden bows, swords, and spears held at the ready as their masked faces stared ominously forward.

Iicarn.
White feathers and scale-flecked skin were all the pair could see around them, wings spread and bodies held still in warning.
"It's time to make a decision, Kelan," Dilndrou said softly, folding his hands in front of him. "What will you do now?"
Leave, the iicarns' voices echoed clear in their minds. *You do not belong here.*

Kelan gathered his wits about him and said nothing, spreading his own golden wings so that they glowed in the eerie light of the crystal trees.
"What is happening here?" he said at last. "Do you understand who I am?"
It does not matter who you are. You are unauthorized. Leave, or you will be processed.

Kelan did not want to think about what 'processing' meant to them.
"*No.*" Dilndrou took a step forward, and the iicarn rustled their wings, hissing softly.
"Step aside, or I shall deal with the lot of you. The elements have no care for you or your mutant master."

"YOU HAVE NO JURISDICTION HERE!" came a great and booming voice that shook the earth and set the trees to shaking around them, leaves jingling and singing like a thousand tiny bells.
"*What in the*," Kelan gasped, starting.
"...that voice," he whispered in shock, his eyes widening.
"NO. I AM *THE VOICE!*" it roared again, and the source strode proudly into the ring of iicarn, round, wizened, and cierne.
"And the festivities are being held at the Laps Grand Ballroom.
Dilndrou, have you gotten lost? I can direct you there, if you wish," Dietrich said in his normal voice, an uncharacteristically dangerous glint in his eye.
Several jdhuyssai-- white, red, golden, pink, and blue-- drifted in a slow and graceful circle around his shoulders as he approached, whispering excitedly to him in their own language.
"*You!!*
I expected Artemio, but never you," the old alligator hissed. "So Aqk was right about you..."

The old wizard laughed softly, shaking his head. "I loved Aqk, but she was dangerous in the worst of times. Too radical, too predatory.
But then... all three of you were, *weren't you?*"
As quickly as his faint mirth had come, it was gone again, Dietrich's face growing stern and harsh.
"All of you are disgraces to your gods.
To think you could dishonor their memories so, playing at being gods yourselves, fooling thousands of fae into worshipping and serving in your own names, knowing all the while that servants were *all any of us ever were...*"
"The gods are dead, you old fool!" Dilndrou cried.
"They've been dead for millenia, and you've had no purpose in life for as long.
We did what we could to make the best of what little we had left... and *you...*"

"...and I befriended the *Aeneski* instead of enslaving them, and inspired the study of the arcane as well as the construction of an entire mages' country through that friendship.
You are the worst sort of manipulative, Dilndrou-- or was it *Aqk* who came up with that scheme? I would not be surprised.
I like Artemio not and trust him even less, but he treats his corpses with more respect than your kin have treated the fair folk." The lion-mage

crept closer, his face a mask of anger.

Kelan watched in stunned silence, too astonished by the reunion of Beasts to fully process the mad accusations Dietrich was making before them.
"Aqk... Aqk was a far nobler beast than you could ever have hoped--" he began, clutching his stomach as it roiled; the mirajin was still slowly flaking away his defenses.
"*Ha!*" Dietrich laughed bitterly.

"Do wings, grace, strength and beauty equal nobility and majesty in your head, *Kaelan?* She had all of those, as well as a tongue sharp as her talons and a judgemental streak that I'm sure took the heads of many innocents. I am a carnivore as much as she was, but a cat knows to sheathe its claws until they are necessary.
"What I want to know, *Dilndrou*," he said, disregarding Kelan's presence again at once, "is if you are *at all aware that you are responsible for the very thing you crusade against!*"
"Do not toy with me, *feline,*" Dilndrou snarled.
"This is no game." Dietrich's voice softened to a cruel purr.

"How noble of you it was to spare Nefirian's life from the superstitious hordes you created. How *noble* it was to raise a frightened cub with even more pressure and fear, mm? If you beat an animal for long enough, it becomes paranoid, aggressive...
What love did he know until he created that jewel? You have always made for a harsh master, Dilndrou, and it was your scheme to make an alchemist of him that gave him the botched ritual that crafted the Fatis Mirajin.
"It was your treatment that inspired him to flee your wrath and the vengeance of his clan and keep it for himself, rather than show you what he had done-- and *that* is how the crystal came to be!"

"You *DARE?!*"
Dilndrou hurled himself at Dietrich, fingers curled into claws.
But he drifted through the other archmage's illusory image, and the jdhuyssai swarmed him at once.
Kelan drew his bow and prepared to fire, but before he could bring an arrow to his string, he found himself lying in a heap atop his companion.

The trees around them were sickly, but green, and the Chapter felt his defenses slowly strengthening again.

"...What--"
"*Get off me!!*" Dilndrou raged, scrabbling to his feet and looking around him.
Leave this place and go home, Dietrich's voice whispered in their minds.
If you are wise, you will not return.

"We're in Limbo Peninsula," Kelan observed softly, putting his bow away again as dread filled his stomach.
"The cowardly son of a bitch teleported us away," Dilndrou spat.
"So be it, then.

We've seen enough, Dilndrou-- it's time to prepare for an invasion."

Book VII Holiday Special - All You Dreamers

"So here we are, at the Doctor's Ball," Elliot said, taking in all the sights, sounds and smells of the revelry around them as she adjusted her steamknight goggles.
She felt rather anxious being here in Chimre again after her brother's leupak-related mental decline... but Grey nagged her for days on end until she agreed to come after all.

He was surprisingly good at heart-wrenching puppy eyes.

"So, have you ever been before?" she asked, playing with one of the decorative buttons on her vest.
"No, no. I'd always wanted to, but, well..." Grey smiled good-naturedly. "I never had the heart to come alone."
"Oh, Grey! You don't need to a be pair to go to a Ball-- I'm sure there are lots of people who'd love to have a dance with you." Elliot gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder.
"Besides, you're an engineer-- you could've set up a booth, or you could go exchange notes and blueprints with some of the others."
"Yeah. Yeah, I suppose you're right.
Maybe I'll do that next year, make little defender models for the kiddies or something. It'll be sw--"

A pair of strong arms wrapped around Elliot and Grey's waists, giving them a friendly-- and powerful-- greeting squeeze.

"Geez, you two. Do you have to be so damned *tall* all the time? I can fix that, you know!"
"Nefirian! You're all sparkly!" Elliot laughed, causing the little Chapter to grin.
"That's a hell of a costume you've got there, Dreamscar. Did you make it yourself?"
"Oh, goodness no," he breathed. "I'd put the tailors out of business.
"I'm so glad to see both of you-- especially *you*, Grey. This is our first time meeting outside of the Reverie, isn't it? You make a fantastic couple of auto-pilots."
"It was too good an opportunity to pass up," Grey said, beaming. "This ball is really something-- I'll have to catch it from the start next year.
Anyway, what do you think of this crystal mine strike nonsense? Word must've gotten up to you by now.
I can't get the silisk back to work no matter how hard I try; they're insisting the mines are haunted, and it's thrown shard demand for a loop.
I'll have to raise prices on lodicas and varani soon, and that'll be hell on business for sure."

Nefirian frowned, scratching his cheek. "I'm well aware-- and it's no curse, at least not in the usual sense.
It seems we're dealing with the emergence of a race of mutants calling themselves the *Kassen*, a subterranean species. Not spiders, thankfully, but they don't take very kindly to strangers by the sound of it.
I just sent one of my best bio docs down to Dreamsong to see if he can lure them out for a little peacemaking. I'm pretty damn confident in his abilities; it seems like anomalies and phenomena fall at his feet when he shows up, so I'm hoping they'll find him irresistable.
...to approach, not to eat," he added with a laugh that made Grey and Elliot slightly nervous.
"Hmm... Kassen. Some of my researchers and associates have had sightings of them wandering the deeper woods around Gier and Axl lately.
I hope we haven't got another situation on our hands," Elliot said. "New friends, however, we can use in times like these. I hope your doc is up to the task..."

She paused, tilted her head, and mouthed "Gabriel?" at the Dreamwaker.
Nefirian only smiled.

"At any rate... Elliot, would you care for a quick dance? We had such a *fantastic* time last year, and I'd quite like to relive it.
With more clothing on," he added.
"I'd be enchanted. Grey, will you be alright?"
"Of course. You two go ahead, hmm? I'm going to have a look around at the booths. Be good!"

Grey headed off across the ballroom as Elliot and Nef exchanged a hug.
"Nefirian," she said in a hushed voice, brushing his bangs away from his face. "There's something different about you this year... Is everything alright?"
He tilted his head and rose an eyebrow, leading her over to the dance floor. "You've noticed?"
"I couldn't help but notice.

It's in your posture, your gait-- lovely heels, by the way-- and even... why, something about you *looks* unsual, even, but I can't place it. "
They began to dance, Nefirian's ears pricking upright as they circled the floor.
"You've a keen sense of intuition, my dear. Allow me to tell you a story, if you'd care to listen?"

"Always."

"Hey, kid," Grey said, pulling a tightly-bound roll of paper out of his pocket and setting it on a booth table.
"I brought you a present. Don't chew it up playing fetch or anything, y'hear?"
Na'than unrolled the blueprints and stared at them in astonishment. "Dreamwaker! These are blueprints for the...
How can I possibly repay you for this, Mr. Scott? Are you sure you--"

Grey waved him off. "Don't mention it, huh?
I'm a made man thanks to the Lord-Doctor; the least I can do is let you in on these specs in return.
Keep 'em safe, and make something keen for your country. That'll be thanks enough to me, seein' it in the papers back home."

"... I'm gonna call her Quicksilver," Na'th said with stars in his eyes.

"Many years ago," Nefirian said, "when the world was still in the process of being civilized by your people and the *Aeneski*, I realized that my people and I had to learn to fit in if I was to have any hope of avoiding war.
Chimre was born, and we did all we could to make the leupaks who chose to live in the cities here as nonthreatening as we could.
But that had to include me too, most of all.
I am a different sort than the rest, so that is easier in some ways," he said, gesturing to himself, "and more difficult in others.
Namely, when the leader of a country suddenly vanishes for months, people ask questions, as people are wont to do."

Elliot blinked, scrunching her nose. "You *do* disappear for a while during the colder season, don't you?
No public appearances, no statements, nothing until things begin to warm up again. Why is that?"

The Dreamwaker smiled.
"Every year, Elliot, I must hatch a new clutch of leupaks.

"Doctor's Ball is my final, resonating hurrah before I leave the public eye-- lest the sight of me afterwards remind the people of what I *truly* am.
The Ball lets me spread a bit of happiness and good cheer on the behalf of the Silent Rose, as well as giving me a chance to prepare this false body for ... well, your people would consider it a rather horrific transformation. But it is what it is.
When I am preparing to clutch, I must leave for the Reverie before I am stranded here, far from my nest and my *true* home."
"A clutch of leupaks? How many do you mean?"
"Hundreds, sometimes a thousand or two," he laughed, spreading his arms wide in a flourish. "I'll give you a moment to let that sink in."

Elliot was flabbergasted. "So you hatch them in the Reverie to keep them from overwhelming Valenth.
But... you're a leupak. Who-- or *what*-- do you lay them in? Is the White Boralion--"
"The White Boralion is a tool. It's no more my true self than this," he admitted, clapping his hands upon his belly.

"They are merely aspects-- just... facets of the *thing* I've become. And yes, I am a leupak... but I am *not* like the others. Some can choose to do what I do... but it is a choice, for them.
I hatch my own eggs. I must."

Elliot considered his costume for a moment. "So you're the Queen."

"Yes. Yes, Elliot, I am," he said, his broad and unsettling smile nearly splitting his face in two. Elliot reached up to carefully trace her finger across his lips.
"But this year, I will not be hatching my annual clutch. There are far more urgent things that must be seen to first." Nefirian gently looped his arm around Elliot's, walking with her through the crowds.
"But why?
It sounds like such an important thing for you... what could possibly overshadow it?"

But the Dreamwaker gently placed a clawed finger to her lips. "Shhh. You'll know very soon, Elliot. I promise."

And then he melted away into the Ballroom as though he had never been, leaving Elliot to wonder as the revelers danced and moved around her.

Book VII Holiday Special - The Grand Finale!

"Well, everyone-- it seems that our celebration is finally drawing to a close," Nefirian announced, bowing his head in sadness.
"We've had an absolutely splendid time with all of you this year. Thank you for celebrating Doctor's Ball with us.
Before we send you all home, my good friend Giovan has an announcement he'd like to make. Gio, if you would?"
Gio strode proudly up to the stage, taking the microphone and giving it a quick tap. "Hello, hello, hello. How's everybody doing tonight, huh?
So many costumes out there-- you all look freakin' awesome!" He paused, waiting for the crowd to quiet down again.
"So, yeah. You've all heard that Glass Marionette wouldn't be attending Doctor's Ball this year. That's pretty lame, huh?
Welll... it turns out that they didn't attend-- because they wanted to set up a concert for the closing ceremonies!"

Giovan smiled smugly as the curtains rose behind him, revealing the band as the ballroom erupted in cheers and applause.
Lyric stepped forward, and the pair had a brief game of tug-of-war with the microphone before Gio finally relinquished it with a laugh.

"So," the guitarist said in his characteristic whisper, grinning. "You guys want some music, huh? I think we can do that. *Didier?*"

As the band began to play, Giovan made his way offstage and into the crowd. He spotted Nefirian standing nearby, and the chapter beckoned him over.
"What's up, boss?"
"I just got word from Gier-- Gabriel's located a small group of traveling Kassen. Once the Ball is wrapped up, I'll be heading out to meet them and retrieve him."

"Oh, *come on!* Kill my mood, why don't you? I don't wanna hear about that little worm again," Gio said, sucking his teeth indignantly.
"Gio, come now. You've got your powers, there's no need for this envy game anymore. Besides, he's no threat to you or your position," Nef reassured him, patting him on the shoulder. "Remember-- this was his last mission as a mortal man. He's passed, and the trial is over.

Once he's back here in Chimre, I put him through processing, and he's under *your* command."
Giovan smiled faintly. "Yeah. Don't worry, boss. I'll take good care of him, *promise.*"
"Attaboy."

Suddenly, the temperature around them dropped a few degrees, and someone cleared their throat behind them. "Nefirian. A word with you, please?"
Giovan bared his teeth, his eyes flashing cold blue.
"Nigel," Nef said cooly. "Of course-- If you'll excuse us, Giovan?"
"Gladly," he spat, stalking away into the crowd.

"Huh," Eva said, raising an eyebrow as she leaned against Na'than's shoulder."You know, Lyric sort of favors the Dreamwaker a bit, doesn't he? It's easier to tell when his hair moves away from his cheeks, but..."
Na'than pretended to squint. "Really? I don't see it! Maybe it's the light," he lied, his left ear twitching a bit.
"Yeah, maybe it's just me." Eva smiled. "Still... it's nice to finally get to see them in concert. I always wanted to go to one, but my parents always flipped their unholy shit if I even considered going out for the night instead of studying. God, I kind of hated them."
"Hey, hey. It's alright. Besides, you know what? I'm sorta friends with Lyri, anyway. I could totally get VIP tickets for us sometime, if you're really into the Marionette."
"You could do that? Na'th... that would be incredible. She sighed. "Freedom feels so... amazing."

Nefirian closed and locked the door in the private hall upstairs as Nigel paced in the middle of the dark floor, his irritation plain on his face.

It had been a year since their alliance, and beyond managing to recruit Dietrich-- whom he greatly preferred the company and tutelage of-- Nef had seen little benefit on his end.
The viadante fed readily in his cities, giving the feral leupaks unwanted extra competition and making the people more anxious. He cared

even less for the small bands of roving undead the demons and their vampire pets tended to raise from the remains of unlucky travelers in the Wilds.
Of course, he knew what this was about before Nigel had even opened his mouth.
"Your plague leupaks... *what is the meaning of this?*They frighten my minions. They've eaten some of my vampires and ghouls and they ruin our necromancy. *Why have you created such things?!*"
"I told you from the start," Nefirian said slowly. "I dislike the undead. *Immensely*. My cities are clean, Nigel. My people are healthy, and my laboratories are spotless. When leupaks kill, they honor the dead by making use of everything the corpse has to offer. We have no place here for walking dead or rotting bodies in the streets. You promised me that I would see only viadante and vampires. But your viadante and vampires brought undead of their own, and I *cannot* abide it."

"What makes your people so superior to mine?" Nigel growled."You make mutants and run great factories full of clones for blood and meat. You lace your products with chemicals and mutagens and use your sweet little round face to play innocent to the people watching-- the people who depend on you and your country's so-called "safety". How is that so different from us and what we do? Who are *you* to judge?"
"Don't mishear me, Nigel." Nefirian ran his tongue over his lips; the necromancer would not coax a rise out of him. "Your people are people. But an animate, rotting body with no mind or sense of self is *not* a person-- and furthermore, an animate, rotting body is a health risk. I have citizens to worry about. Citizens who *aren't* all leupaks and resistant to humanoid diseases."

"*My* people need to eat and reproduce, too."
"I'm not concerned about that," Nef insisted, his tone even. "Your people are welcome to do whatever they need to do, provided it does not put *my* people at risk. You have Hel, Nigel. Chimre is all I and my people have, and I will not turn a blind eye to any creature who threatens that. Even you and yours."

Nigel bristled, turning on his heel, marching forward and coming to a stop in front of the little Chapter. He towered over him, much as he towered over everyone. But Nefirian had always been short, and so one more tall person glowering down at him made little difference.
"You are making a mistake, Nefirian. Our presence will make anyone think twice about disturbing you and your projects.
Surely, a few ghouls and zombies are worth that sort of protection."
"You being here makes me even more of a flashing red target to the Firestarters and the Renatus-- as laughable a threat as the former currently is," Nef spat. "Furthermore, you have done little to benefit the Rose thus far. I appreciate your magic lessons and your assistance in coaxing Dietrich to join us, but I have no intention of using necromancy in any project of mine, and we have held our own just fine for hundreds of years." He knew the eerie man had only intended them to bolster his own ranks as well, but he saw no reason to reveal that awareness just yet. "Need I remind you of the results of the Luxi invasion?"

Nigel narrowed his eyes. "You have crafted a tall pedestal for yourself, and now you believe a few mutants and a sylvan no-man's land is enough to protect your kingdom. Don't be *stupid*-- how long do you think you have before a second Grenadienne takes place?"

Nef's eyes widened in shock-- but the jab didn't have quite the effect Nigel was hoping for. "I have never been a man who needed the assistance of outside 'gods' to cut my path, and all your so-called alliance has done so far is to emphasize that fact." His tone was cold. "I don't need you, Chira, or anyone else throwing wrenches in my plans. I want your people to follow my laws down to the letter, or I want them *out of my country*. No walking corpse is worth the life of even a single farm-clone."

"Have you forgotten something?" Nigel's voice became soft and sweet. "*You* may not need us, Nefirian, but I know someone who does. Chira hasn't been keeping tabs up on you lately, *has she?*"
"... what are you insinuating?"
"I thought not." The old man smirked. "Your pet Elysian has had her mind all but flayed by the Fatis Mirajin, you know. It's only with great pains that she can sustain a personality, let alone... *well.*Chira has been working hard to find a way to restore her mind, but without that care... what can I say?" Nigel purred. "The Elysians will be a bit more than just *functionally* extinct."

The Dreamwaker clenched his teeth and fists in silent rage, his blood running cold. "This relationship isn't as voluntary as you've led me to believe, is it, *Artemio?* So be it." He stormed over to the door, tearing it off its hinges and tossing it onto the floor nearby.

"Stay if you must... *but keep out of my way."*

Book VII Ch 16: Small Concerns

The Emery Lounge
Gier, South Dreamsong

"Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me, Dree. If you'd be so kind, tell me why your people have decided to come to the surface?"
Gabe huddled in a small booth in the back of the bar, seated across from a small, stout, bright-eyed woman with crystalline hair.
She glanced cautiously over her shoulder before pulling her cloak a bit closer around her; a few chimaera nearby turned their heads, feigning disinterest.

"I won't lie, I don't much like it up here," she admitted.
"But the voices are gettin' antsy like we've never heard before. Whisperin' about great change and disaster and claimin' what's theirs."

The little woman paused, frowned, and leaned in closer to Gabe. "*Ya know what I mean, right?*"
Gabe swallowed. "I know what you mean."

He had *no idea* what she meant.

"Listen, I'm a... *sensitive*, but I can't hear them, myself. Not like you can.

But I work for someone who knows the, erm, *voices* better than anyone else on Valenth.
He'll be here in a few days, and maybe he can help somehow."
"Alright... but remember what I told ya.
Anyone tries ta harvest me bones, and ye'll be up ta yer ears in violet fury."

Gabriel wondered if she meant what he thought she meant, and nodded slowly.

"No bone-harvesting. *I promise*."

He *really* hoped she didn't mean what he thought she meant.

Book VII Ch 17: Kassen Bar Social

The Emery Lounge
Gier, South Dreamsong

The white, unicorn-drawn carriage came to a stop in front of the shoddy bar, looking for all the world like a fragment of a fairytale lost in the seedy streets of Gier. The shining steeds tossed their heads and snorted in distaste at their surroundings as the doors of the vehicle fell open. Five strange, fat creatures made their way out-- semi-reptilian people with smooth, colorful skins, leupak-like ears and dimly luminant eyes, they held large and showy guns at their sides and against their chests as they waited for their charge to emerge.

"Don't be so tense.
Remember, you're just here to keep up appearances-- I can take care of myself."
The Dreamwaker climbed out of the carriage, gently scratching the chins of his unicorns before making his way for the bar entrance.
He did not turn to consider the people pausing on the street to stare at him in slack-jawed awe and thinly-veiled fear; he could feel their eyes upon him, and the faint pulse of their thoughts tickled his synapses.

"Professors, this is the place. Try not to make any more of a scene than is necessary," he announced as he walked forward, the doors opening for him of their own accord.
The daedlans fell into step close after him, their ears flicking in silent anticipation.

As they entered the bar, all conversation ceased at once, save for the occasional patron who was too drunk to notice. All eyes turned on them; the bartender sat down the mug she was cleaning and shuffled a few steps back to watch from the kitchen door, while the tables seated closest to the door stared in confused and uncertain silence, some pushing their drinks aside.

The Dreamwaker paid them no mind.
He could feel the gentle, enticing pull of Gabriel's psionic aura, and he followed it into the very back of the baroom.
The young Doc had found himself a booth as far away from the noisy bustle as he could get, huddling uncomfortably in it with his diminutive guests seated at both sides.
At a gesture, six chairs shuffled forward to align themselves pleasingly around the outer rim of the booth; the daedlan Professors waited to sit until Nefirian himself had chosen the centermost seat for himself.
The Dreamwaker exchanged looks with Gabriel and Dree as the inhabitants of the little bar shuffled closer as discreetly as they could manage, as though they believed their movements and intent could ever escape the little Chapter's notice.

The papers would be roaring with headlines tomorrow. Nefirian hoped there would be some new gems to bolster his clipping collection with.

"Dree," Gabe said breathlessly, still astonished with his leader's grand entrance, "this is the... erm, man I told you about--"
"'E's no man," Dree cut him off at once, fearlessly meeting the Dreamwaker's gaze with the other kassen at her sides.

"You're one of 'em, arencha, walkin' the world'a men. I can feel it in ya, sure enough. "
Much to Gabe's astonishment, Nef seemed more overwhelmed by the little fae than they were of him, looking down at them with surprise-- and more than a little endearment.
"You know me," he said softly. "And yet, I know so little about you.
You're creatures of the earth-- *my* earth, the boralion tunnels and the crystal caverns. I look at you and *see so many things*, but I'd much rather hear what you have to say, first."

Once the Chapter had spoken, however, the kassen erupted into a cacophony of shouts.

"It's him! It's *him*... It's *YOU!*"
"What are you? *Why do we always hear your voice?!*"
"Can you *stop* it? Can you help us? Please!"
"ALRIGHT, THAT'S ENOUGH'A THAT FROM ALL'A YA!" Dree shouted, and the other creatures promptly quieted again, some opting to press their faces into their drinks.

The daedlans glanced at one another and their superior in concern.

"Ugh, right. Now that that's outta th' way," she sighed. "I dunno how much your friend has told ya, so I'll start from the top.

We're the kassen-- we've lived underground for as long as I can remember. My great great grandparents... they were *Aeneski* miners and merchants, diggin' up miracrystal and sellin' 'em off for a living. You ask any other kassen, they'll tell you the same, I bet.
But over time, they say somethin' changed. Before anyone knew, we went from workin' the mines to livin' in 'em, and we kept away from the people of the outside world.
Now, we're what ya get... except there's more to it than that."

Nef frowned, chewing his lip. "So you're-- pardon the term-- multi-generational mutants. And you say you've been hearing my voice?"
The kassen began to prattle, but Dree cut them off with a fierce glare.
"We hear things.

Most of us-- ya wander the Subterranea long enough and you'll meet some lucky bastard that doesn't hear anythin'. But it's a part of life for most kassen.

"We live and die with the crystals, and we can hear th' voices in their resonations--or, we hear 'em whether we like it or not, more like," she added.
"Most of it's just gibberish, voices that crop up outta nowhere like snips of conversation comin' in from somewhere else, somewhere unseen. Some of us've looked through the holes between worlds, and they say the voices are coming from there. Some a'the craziest ones've run through ta look. They don't come back.
But none of us have ever had a face ta put ta any of 'em... until *now*."
"What do you hear?" he asked cautiously, leaning in closer; the Professors behind him followed suit.
"Lately? The voices are excited, anxious... maybe a little scared," Dree said. "There's been talk'a revolution, of banding together ta take on Valenth, of the dream world bleeding out into reality.
And we've heard you," she added.
"We hear you talkin' about change, encouraging somethin'. Promisin' that nobody can keep anybody down forever.
And promisin' that everyone who keeps anyone down'll get theirs someday soon."
"Are you sure it's him?" Gabe asked meekly. "People can have pretty similar voices--"
"It's him," Dree said gruffly. "When he talks... the crystals vibrate a certain way, an' we can feel it in our hearts.
I know those vibrations... we all do."

"And you'd say these voices... *plague you?"* Nefirian asked.

"Aye," Dree said. "We hear 'em constantly... they drive our people mad.
We have our ways of dealin' with 'em, but they're temporary and imperfect. Th' brew's the best one." Leaning over, she nudged a small keg hidden under the table with her foot.
"More a'less shuts 'em up for a little while-- It was somethin' we discovered a little while ago. Burkeroot grows around big miracrystal deposits sometimes. We mash it inta paste and make burke brew from it, 'cause it's too bitter ta just eat."
"*Fascinating*." Nef tilted his head. "Do you mind if I sample some?"
"Knock yerself out."
Nef took the mug, sniffing curiously at it and getting a bit of foam on the tip of his nose.
Satisfied, he tipped it back for a long drink-- then promptly slammed it down on the table, his ears pricking straight up and his eyes widening.

The Professors started at once, anxious.
"Milord? Is everything--"

Nef drew in a deep, gasping breath, grimacing. "I-- I don't-- oh, *gods*--"
"Woah, careful, lad!" Dree frowned. "It does take a bit'a gettin' used to--"

"*MY BRAIN!*" the Dreamwaker shrieked, clutching his head as his third eye split open, red-tinged tears pouring out.
"*IT'S D-D-DOING SOMETHING TO MY*--"

He collapsed upon the table, knocking several mugs over in the process.

The kassen, the daedlans, and Gabriel all stared at the comatose chapter in wide-eyed shock.

"L-lord-Doctor?!"

"Is... Is 'e dead?" Dree gasped. "Maybe we aughta go..."
"Well, s'one way t'stop the voices," one of the other kassen muttered as they beat a hasty retreat, leaving the tiny bar in an uproar.
"Think we could find the other ones and give 'em the brew, too?"

"No!!"

Book VII Ch 18: Well, That Was Embarassing

"Lord-Doctor! A-are you alright? What happened?"
"Psionic interference.
I should've known better, but I didn't expect it to be so strong. I had to test it," Nefirian admitted with a soft chuckle, leaning heavily against the side of the carriage as he rubbed his numb cheek, blinking.
"Pity it cut our meeting short, but I'm intrigued. I'll have to send Dree a letter and let her know I'm alright, see about meeting again sometime."

Gabriel stared at his hands, pressing the tips of his thumbs together. "But why would it knock you out completely?

I've never heard of psychic power being tied to the vital status of a creature... not to imply you're a *creature*," he added quickly.
"Gabe, let's be honest with each other," the Dreamwaker laughed.
"You're a damn fine Bio Doc. You know a creature when you see one, and you're most definitely seeing one, yes?"

Gabriel considered for a moment, then nodded quickly.
"There's a good man.
At any rate, cutting dreamkin off from their connection to the Reverie is exceedingly dangerous. You recall the horrible calamity that happened a few years ago-- same thing, different scope.
My connection is a bit more thorough, a bit more all-encompassing than most. I wouldnt've died, no, but, *well.*
Liken it to removing the battery from an automaton-- it temporarily severed me from my body, *go figure!*"

Gabe's jaw dropped. "Severed you from your--?!"
"Mmmhmm.
It seems that burkeroot, whatever it is, is quite a powerful psychic suppressant.
The papers are going to have themselves a field day on this one... to say nothing of what the Firestarters might try to do with it," Nef sighed, gazing out the carriage window as the shimmering crystal-trees zoomed past.
"I'll have to speak with Andrew when we get back. If I don't put a stop to this recent bout of slayings, this could get seriously ugly for us."
Outside, the unicorns came to a stop, stomping their hooves on the soft dirt road as they tossed their heads.
Nefirian gave a long, weary sigh before climbing to his feet, leaving the carriage and pushing his hair away from his eyes.
"Gabriel, we're at the Cathedral. I'll be needing your participation in a project tonight, if you'd care to oblige me."
"Oh? Oh, of course! Just let me know what I can do," he said, hopping out from his side and cautiously holding his hand out to one of the pearly ungulates.
The unicorn eyed him appraisingly before giving him a rough nudge with its nose, and he laughed. "Woah, woah. Be gentle!"

Nefirian watched him with an eerie smile before ascending the stairs to the front door. Glancing up, Gabriel hurried to follow.
"So, who's Andrew? That's not Thorne--?"
"No, no," Nef shook his head.
"Andrew is an automecha expert and leupologist of ours. He has a knack for dealing with slayers; there's a particularly horrid one in the Gier area lately.
He's little more than a serial killer, and I'd like to see it come to a stop, especially before this fellow catches wind of burkeroot.
It could become a catastrophe if he got it in his mind to try using it as a weapon."
"How horrible."
Gabriel had never seen any problem with leupaks as a species. They were eerie and unfamiliar, certainly, but most talk of them doing anything untoward was rumor.
He thought of how calm and reasonable Felld was, and wondered how anyone could decide to hurt him out of sheer malice.

Then he remembered Anom, and cringed.

Nefirian led Gabriel through his study, full of hundreds of books, jars, curiosities and trinkets dripping from the shelf-covered walls. He made his way to the back of the room and slid open a large door, revealing a stairwell leading far into darkness below.
"This way, if you please.
This won't take long at all, and then perhaps you'd like to stay and look around a while, maybe have some tea."
"Oh, certainly," Gabe breathed, staring wistfully at the sea of knowledge surrounding him.
Reluctantly, he followed the Lord-Doctor down the stairs, staying close behind him.
Reptilian shapes scurried over the dimly-lit walls, making Gabriel jump as they passed near his face and across his shoes.
"Wh... where are we going, anyhow?"

"Oh! Forgive me for not explaining. My personal laboratory is down here-- the one on Valenth, anyway. Well, the one *sort-of* on Valenth,

since the Cathedral is essentially a pocket of warpspace in its own right.

We're sitting right on the edge of dreams and reality, so it's difficult to say exactly *where* it is.
Or when, or how, or any of those other *wh*-words."
"...Oh," Gabe said meekly, squinting and covering his eyes as he walked into the laboratory.
Gleaming metal, pristine white tiles and tabletops and well-polished glass all shone in the light.
He caught a glimpse of nondescript things floating in tanks full of pink-tinged liquid, mutants curled and sleeping in metal cages, insect larvae writhing in great clusters in jars, and languid reptiles watching from terrariums stacked atop desks and shelves.

"I... wow. This place is... *huge*."
"I do need plenty of room for my projects," Nef admitted, walking over to an operating table and carefully opening the buckles attached to it.

Gabriel didn't recall having walked across the room, or sitting atop the table.
He blinked in dull confusion as Nefirian worked around him, seemingly preparing for something.
"I don't feel quite right," Gabe admitted. "What are we doing?"
"Processing," Nefirian said in an odd, chiming voice as he strapped the Bio Doc onto the table by his wrists and ankles.
Something in Gabe's head cried out to him-- but the voice of panic was cut short as quickly as it came. He twitched.

"But I-- what does that mean? How... I... *why are you...?*"

Why are you what? Gabriel thought, gritting his teeth as his thoughts swirled into a meaningless jumble.

The Dreamwaker gently stroked his cheek.
"Shhh-hhh, Gabriel. I'll take very good care of you-- *I promise*.
Now, just relax..."

As Nefirian turned away to gather syringes and surgical tools, Gabriel stared up at the ceiling, his body trembling as his mind struggled to break through the sudden fog.

He barely registered the pinprick on his left arm, and by the time he managed to grasp that something was terribly wrong, his tongue was too numb to cry out for him, and his consciousness slipped out from under him and into the dark.

"*Trust me...*"

Book VII Ch 19: Pale

Gabriel. Gabriel, the fog whispered, amidst the sound of singing crystals and distant, beating wings.

His heartbeat thundered in his ears, and he struggled to see around him-- to put faces and images to the cacophony.
His feet felt thick and heavy; each forward step was an eternity, moving slowly ahead into a sea of smoky gray on gray.
"H-hello?" he called, listening and shivering as his voice was sucked up by the void surrounding him.
There was nothing here, and--*where, exactly, was he?*

The ground beneath his feet rumbled and quaked suddenly.
As he fell backwards, he watched with growing terror as three eyes as huge as planets loomed above him-- two glowing green, one a familiar and piercing shade of magenta.

Come home to me, Gabriel.

Gabriel jerked awake with a deep and gasping breath.

His chest and lungs responded with a jolt of pain, and he began to cough violently, the muscles of his back spasming oddly with each expulsion of breath.
Once the coughing fit calmed at last, he lay gingerly back again, taking mental inventory as his head swam, slow and fuzzy.
Every inch of him ached; his legs and back felt especially horrible, as though his muscles had been torn away and rewrapped around his bones.
Again, something between his back and the bed twitched, and he gritted his teeth.

Nothing felt right, and Gabriel wondered dimly what had happened after he had fallen asleep--

Memories of the Dreamwaker's lab flooded back into him, clipped and incomplete. His disjointed, surreal movements across the room, his sudden appearance upon the operating table, *his scrambled thoughts and the way Nefirian had smiled at him before--*

Gabriel's eyes suddenly focused on his hands.

They were bone-pale, shimmering faintly in the dim light; each finger capped with a sharp little claw.
Like a trapped bird, the things on his back fluttered-- a quick and delicate percussion against the sheets.

Turning his head slowly, Gabriel stared at his new wings and screamed, his long, inhuman ears flattening backwards.

"Good morning!"

Book VII Ch 20: Metamorph

The Lord-Doctor's Hidden Laboratory
Cathedral of a Thousand Roses
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

"What... what's happened--" Gabriel began once he'd caught his breath, trembling.

His tongue felt thick and awkward in his mouth. He stuck it out; it uncurled far beyond his face, pink fading to blue-black with a diminutive, four-fingered talon on the tip.
This time, he opted to recoil in horror rather than scream, but the Lord-Doctor just smiled brightly down at him, clutching a food-covered plate. "Why," he said casually, "you've been processed, of course!
You really should rest, though, and have some breakfast. Once I've gotten some food into you, I'll bring the mirror around."

Gabe pressed his tongue back into his mouth, lightly brushing his fingertips over his sharp teeth.
He stared at his fingers, pressed his palms against the sides of his face, feeling his head, his ears, everything he could reach in cautious and fearful appraisal.

"Why? *Why?* What am I? Did you-- did *you* do this--"
"Hundreds of years of research and study, careful experimentation, endless tinkering and fussing and poking about, and more money than I *really* care to think of all went into the creation of the iicarn.
So many questions plagued my work; leupaks and humans can't be spliced. Hybrids were an impossibility... dangerous to even attempt.
"Why?", I asked, and I tried everything I could concoct to force it to work... it was a madness, I suppose," Nefirian admitted wistfully.
"But I couldn't give up. There was so much at stake-- the possibility of finding a way for leupaks and humans to come to know each other a little better, share their experiences, and perhaps grow to be more understanding of their differences as well as acknowledging their simularities... monstrous or not, leupaks are still *faeries*, you know.
Wildly different in appearance and physiology from their *Aeneski* predecessors, but fae.
At any rate-- I had a sudden revelation, almost out of thin air. I don't know what drove me to try it... it might've been an accident. It might've been a whim.
But... dragon's blood, Gabriel," he announced with triumph shining in his eyes, "*dragon's blood*, typically so unstable and lethal to blend with anything involving leupaks, proved to be the key!
And so, the daedlans were born. I had successfully completed one of my greatest projects of that time. The vitality in dragons' blood wars with the mirajinoid essence of leupak... but humanoid genes seem to soothe those effects.

"A perfect triad of mind, body, and spirit..."

Long after the Chapter had fallen quiet, his voice echoed through Gabriel's mind, whispering things he couldn't quite make out-- things that made him shiver faintly anyway, as though his subconscious could hear.
Other voices seemed to reply, softer still; a ceaseless back and forth playing out just beyond the fuzz of his thoughts.

One voice sounded-- or perhaps *felt*-- unsettlingly like his own.

"I don't... what is a *daedlan?* Am I... ?"
"Ah, forgive my little tangent! Yes and no, my darling. Yes and no.
You are an *iicarn*, which you likely know far more about; they are similar, but not quite the same. Daedlans are a little more purely leupak. They deal primarily in storing and hatching leupaks' eggs-- harmlessly for all involved, which is a benefit most humanoids don't tend to have without assistance.
In most cases, daedlans are civilians... some help the Organization, others live private lives. Beyond the initial transformation, we leave them to do as they like.
"Iicarn are a bit more militant, for lack of better terminology.
Most iicarn live on this side of the Veil, guarding Mimorre's borders and the forests around it, performing unique tasks as I require them, and generally ensuring everything I cannot watch personally is taken proper care of."

He paused, considering the plate he was holding before setting it gently upon the bed next to Gabriel.

"Please, have something to eat. I'll stay and answer any questions you have-- anything to make this a more comfortable transition for you."

Gabe did as he was told, huddling with his blankets tossed over his shoulders and the wings he wasn't supposed to have.
He ignored the taste of the food in his mouth, instead staring intensely at the little Chapter as he fought to clear his head.

"But... *why?* I don't think I--"
"There are quite a few things you'll have to learn about now, being fully integrated into the fold as you now are, Gabriel," Nef admitted thoughtfully.

"The Silent Rose Organization is many things-- but most of all, we deal in the integration of *supernatural and eldritch creatures* into the world, and all of the different aspects involved with making that as simple and thorough as possible."

"I was already cursed. Why do you think this would make it *easier* for me?!" Gabe spat, gathering his wits about him.

Maybe eating had been a good idea-- he *did* feel a bit better.

That clarity had only made the situation more unbearable, however.

"Gabriel, you're a top-level psychic. Psions with your level of untapped and untrained talent are a danger to themselves and others, if not to the societies they live within.
Splitcha is only a filter-- they figure out who is insignificant, who is dead meat, and who might blast a few city blocks out of existence on a bad day.
The third category comes to *me*-- there are no exceptions.
Yes, you're an unusual case in that you're a beacon; you're not wired to cause obvious changes in your environment, not deliberately.
But people like you influence other supernatural creatures-- other creatures which, in most cases, are considered exceptionally dangerous.

Like miraplasm elementals, dragons, and *unidentified ectothermic lifeforms* like the thing you found in Aensdoun," he said, narrowing his eyes.
"Imagine what might happen if lab-gremlins swarmed a town, or a flock of rampant dragons were at the beck and call of a single man.
Imagine if it were that thing locked away in that temple. How many settlements in Valenth do you imagine could stand up to the might and fury of such events?

How many *governments*, do you think?"
"That's... that's what being a beacon means?"
"A beacon who learns to control and hone their ability, yes.
Even the most passive psionic talent can be devastating in the right hands-- or *supremely useful*.
I think there are more than enough dragon attacks and dangerous supernatural phenomena happening out there these days, Gabriel. I want you to learn to responsibly handle what the Mirajin has seen fit to give you, without putting yourself or anyone else at risk.

Helping me in return would be nice, of course-- and I have a very special, very *important* task in mind for a biological specialist such as yourself."

"What is it? I... I wish I'd had a bit more say in this, but..."

He thought of Eva and Na'than-- and, despite himself, Hans. "... I... I guess I'd rather not hurt anybody I care about, if this is *really* the only way."

A new bubble of sudden anger welled up in him-- but something *other* crushed and snuffed it out before he could respond or act.
His thoughts shifted and reshaped, devouring the flare of emotion as though it had never been, leaving only an uneasy and artificial silence.
"A global census-- a collection of blood and flesh samples from each supernatural and magical beast known on Valenth.
I'm hoping you'll appreciate that sort of work."
Gabriel nodded quietly, doing his best to ignore a dull ache growing in the back of his skull.

"Yes... yes, of course," he said mechanically, his eyes averted.
"Brilliant!
Rest up for now-- I'll take care of you, and once you've regained your strength and healed up a bit, we'll begin the flying lessons," Nef announced brightly.

"All done? I'll get you another plate or three!"

Book VII Ch 21: The Disciples of Remy

Bordello of the Disciples
Gier, South Dreamsong

Remy relaxed atop a plush cushion, one arm draped lazily over a ruby-furred pandaprrb as he smoked his favorite hookah with the other.

He watched his Disciples as they made their way through the grand hall, escorting their guests across the beautifully-tiled floors and into the private chambers they had chosen for their deeds.

One lay near an empty wall on a pillow of her own, carefully scribbling names into timecharts and checking them off of waiting lists. As occasional curious wanderers made their way into the Bordello, she waved them over, fielding their questions with calm finesse.

"What is this place?" they'd always ask, stars in their eyes from the beauty of it all.

They never quite grew tired of the expressions of mild shock and embarassment when she explained. Some managed to ask for a pamphlet before scooting back out the door, and the rare coincidental visitor stayed to make an appointment, or even insisted on seeing a Disciple at once.
"You think we aught to put a sign out front?" Remy asked, rolling the hookah pipe with his tongue.
"There aren't any laws in Gier against what we're doing," she considered aloud. "But on the other hand, it's not the government of Gier we're worried about, is it?"
Chewing her lip, she wrapped her gold-on-violet robes a little closer around herself and sighed. "It's only a matter of time, though... if many of the others stayed with... with her, chances are they know we're here already."
"Sweetheart, don't be so glum.
I won't let anything happen to any of you," Remy said, sliding from his cushion to head across the room and give the uneasy Erosion a hug and kiss.
"You're not Courtesans anymore. No matter what hold Marquise had over you in the past, that's all done now, and you have every right to do whatever you please. You're free people."

The gilded double-doors opened with a ferocious slam that turned every head in the room.
"I've heard more than enough," Marquise announced, striding into the hall with fury blazing in her eyes.
The ex-Courtesan Disciples hurried into the empty private rooms, peering quietly out from behind the silk and velvet curtains.
Remy unwound his arms from his companion so she could safely join them, rising to his feet to confront his daughter face to face.
"This place is a sanctuary. I trust you're not here with the intent to cause trouble," Remy said cooly, narrowing his good eye.

"What in hell have you done to my Courtesans? How *dare* you?!
I never much liked you, Bastion, but this is more than some idle insult! I--"

Remy caught her hand.
'Bastion" is no more," he said, his gaze hard.

"He could not come to terms with the death of Sasha, and he decided to deal with his pain the only way he knew how--by taking his own life in turn.

He failed, though, and he tried again and again until... *well.*
I suppose, in the end, he technically succeeded in some small way. Did you know that spontaneous regeneration isn't perfect? You can reconstruct a brain, but it won't necessarily preserve the contents.
That's likely more Nefirian's jurisdiction, and I haven't had the heart to find him and tell him what's happened yet." His voice and expression softened.

Marquise snatched her hand away with a snarl. "Don't *toy with me!*
What manner of nonsense is this?! I demand my dragons returned to me at once-- *whoever you are!*
The Court's judgement will be your undoing for this, mark my words!"

"They aren't *your* anything.
Any of them who wish to go with you-- of their own free will-- have every right to do so," Remy announced loudly, glancing over his shoulder at the doorways of the private rooms.
Several observers shuffled into the shadows and out of view.

None came forward.
"And so you have your answer," he said.
"These people heard Bastion's-- and *my*-- cries of pain and confusion, and they came to save me from myself and comfort me.
I demanded nothing of them. I forced nothing upon them.
What does it say to you that they considered those non-acts the greatest gestures of kindness they had yet recieved?"

"Fuck you, Bastion!" she spat. "How *dare you* accuse me of slavery?!
Keep them, if that's what you want. They're obviously little more than whores. You all deserve each other!"
"Strong-- and rather ironic-- words from someone known for sleeping her way into governmental power." Remy pursed his lips.
"I won't have you judging these poor souls. They're good, kind people with big hearts, and they don't deserve your domination or your shame.
So take it with you and kindly remove yourself from my house of worship."
"So be it." Marquise spun upon her heel and took a few steps towards the open door, closing her eyes as a strong wind whipped her hair around her face.

But Remy lifted his hand into the air, taking hold of something invisible just as a knife lodged itself in his breast.
"You're an honorless, slimy coward, Marquise." He pulled the elemental assassin closer to look into her transparent green eyes.
The Courtesan struggled in his grasp, pressing her knife more deeply into his chest-- but to little effect.
"You need to understand--I'm finished fooling around.
I have enough love and affection to spare for everyone, but I won't bear your bullying and manipulation any longer.
I'm a damned *Chapter*, Marquise. I'd rather tend to the lonely and unhappy and fearful people of the world, but if you force my hand,

I *will* match your aggression in kind, and you will find my own brand of wrath more than sufficient.
Look at me!"

As Marquise turned around to face him, she watched in growing horror as Nereida transformed from elemental air to solid, unmoving stone.
Remy sat the woman-shaped statue down upon the floor, pulling her knife from his chest and tossing it casually away. The wound sealed and vanished immediately.

"I've had my neck broken and my face all but torn off. I've been hurled off waterfalls. I've crushed my skull between boulders. *I've scrambled my own damned molecules*.
I've been touched and poisoned by the hand of death its-fucking-self, Marquise, and I have returned to my original, whole, unharmed state as though none of that ever happened," Remy said as he examined the petrified Courtesan before him, brushing his fingertips lightly over the cursed scar across his face.
"Save for this. Sasha's cursed touch was the only thing to ever truly harm me... and all it is is a painful memento.
And you send a little assassin with a knife. I'd laugh, but it'd be rude, wouldn't it?"
There is nothing you can do to kill me that hasn't already failed at the hands of beings greater than you and your cronies. Like Kelan, I'm a force of nature in my own right.

So leave my Disciples alone, and *get the hell out of my temple*."

Book VII Ch 22: Catspaw

Cathedral of a Thousand Roses
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

As Dietrich tended to the royal collection of maur, he giggled to himself at how few people realized the Lord-Doctor was a cat person.

Somehow, he couldn't imagine terribly many people being brave enough to curl up beside these felines, but they sold easily enough when the little Chapter decided to place a few on the market.

It helped to pad the coffers for expensive herbs, components and specimens for the day's experiments-- and also fed the adephagian cows who provided milk for Dietrich's bowl, so who was he to complain?

The genetically "enhanced" lions were a bit friendlier than the wild specimens, and many sported vivid colors and patterns the leonine archmage could only approve of.
Nefirian's sweet tooth was all but legendary, and he saw no reason not to feast his eyes even when he wasn't having a bite himself.

The velvet maur were a bit deeper, richer, and more refined in hue than their candy-colored counterparts, with soft, warm fur to match. Deet swore they were a bit chattier and needier than the others.
He wouldn'tve been surprised if the mad doctor had bred such behavioral quirks into them on purpose-- all the better for chilly nights with a good book and a mug of chocolate foam, after all.

And then... then there were the ones he'd colored in his own likeness, red on white with hints of gold and blue. Deet suspected they'd gotten a little more mirajin than the others; they were a bit unruly, a bit off-kilter, and a little... *leupish*.

Dietrich didn't tell him that he'd secretly bought one of *those* cubs off the black market for himself.

Really, he didn't need to know... that'd just be awkward.

Book VII Ch 23: vs Mecha-Christoph?!

Firewing Base Camp
Whimsy Forest, South Dreamsong

Cazwell pulled his scarf over his neck, buttoning the clasp as he unsteadily rose onto his hind legs with a sigh; it'd be time to go out and survey the area soon.
Tedious as closing the thing was, it was a welcome bit of extra warmth as the temperature around Dreamsong began to steadily drop. As leupaks went, he wasn't terribly substantial, and the chill bit through his scales without remorse.
Moving about would warm him up somewhat, and take his mind off of it, too.

Dropping onto all fours, Cazwell made his way across camp, lifting his head to take note of a sudden commotion.
Nearby, Harley dropped her bags at her feet, laughing as friends wandered up to greet her and welcome her home. She gathered them up in her burly arms en masse for a hug, then glanced up and waved Cazwell over.
"I'm finally back, guys! After the concert, I took a little time ta catch up with the guys. It's been a while, ya know?
Yeah, Chimre was kinda crazy. I've never been to the Ball before! The Dreamwaker's a pretty good dancer. He's got stamina like a workhorse, it's nuts!
No, no, don't worry, I'm sure the food's safe. Why would they drug their own people? That'd just be silly. Stuff ya see with your eyes is one thing, but they make a lot of rumors up about Chimre, and ya know what the Lieutenant says about rumors.
Hi, Caz! How're ya?" she chirped brightly as he approached.
"... you went to *Chimre*," he said slowly. "To play at the *Doctor's Ball*.

Are you serious? Are you *mad?!*"

"Woah, hang on, little guy. Calm down, huh? I got clearance from El'enoa and everything before I went. Nobody here's gotta problem with it."
"*I do,*" he said, his expression darkening. "You went to Chimre, loaded up on residual mirajin and then come strolling back here! You'll undo all our hard work! What if you *mutate?!*"
"Oh, Caz," Harley sighed.
"I'm a silisk. Silisks aren't bothered by mirajin like other races. S'why we do the miracrystal mining and all, yeah?

And, hey... didn't ya say you used to *live in Chimre?* What's the deal?"

"That... that doesn't count," Caz sniffed, momentarily embarassed.
"I wanted a job, and one of my cousins was working as an engineer in Ros Albion, so he put in a good word for me to work at a big library there.

But that's *different!* And I was only there for like a year or something."

Harley frowned. "Caz... you should have one'a the medics take a look at you. You don't look well, and you're gettin' a bit of a bite to ya.
I'm your friend, huh? I'm worried about ya, sweetie."

Cazwell scowled, laying his ears back flat.
"You don't like what I'm saying, so you're telling me I'm sick? That's pretty messed up, Harley.
Look, I'm going out on patrol. Maybe I'll talk to you when I get back.

Harley watched helplessly as the little leupak turned and stalked out into the woods.

"Cazwell, that's not what I-- oh, *damnit!*"

Caz ignored her, pressing through the young trees and into the deeper forest. He searched for a familiar stone that marked the beginning of his usual trail, his feet retracing steps he had taken every evening since he first began his work for the Firestarters.
Lieutenant El'enoa had insisted to him that she didn't much fancy working with slayers of any calibre-- "lawless murderers-for-hire with questionable morals", she'd called them-- but he managed to convince her that he was more interested in serving the long-term goals of the faction and reinforcing the safety of the region than money.

He took his job *very* seriously-- and if he had any say in it, no one in Dreamsong would ever have to fear the wrath of a leupak again when he was done.

Approaching the road leading into Axl, he froze, ducking down into the brush. As people made their way in and out of the city in carriage, on drakeback and on foot, he saw a familiar silhouette just within the trees on the other side.
The suspicious leupak turned its head as it watched the travelers come and go, its eyes glinting cold violet beneath the canopy shadow; it

hadn't seemed to notice him at all.

Cazwell stood stock-still, carefully slipping a clawed gauntlet on over his right paw as he watched and waited.

As the suns dipped low over the sky and the shadows lengthened, the steady stream of traffic slowed to a thin trickle, and the guards at the gates began to pull them closed for the night.
A man rushed up to meet them from within the city, negotiating his way through before the gates were locked. He checked his bags, slung them over his shoulder, and walked quickly up the road as the lights flickered on.

The leupak across the road shifted its position, catching Cazwell's eye.
It watched the newcomer pass before emerging quietly from its hiding place on its hind legs, hide gleaming with a copper sheen in the streetlights.

It was going to go for him!

Bracing himself, Cazwell launched himself across the road. The man screamed, turning on his heel to run back the way he had come and spotting the copper leupak behind him before spinning again to dash into the trees.

Shuffling aside to let the human pass, the second leupak braced itself for impact-- and Cazwell slammed painfully into it with a metallic *clang*, bouncing off harmlessly.

The metal leupak tilted its head with a derisive chuckle, whipping its ball-tipped tail from side to side as Cazwell rose to circle it.
He lunged, swinging his claw down in a wide arc; it scraped across the leupak's tough skin, sparking as it went.
The beast threw a fist into Cazwell's soft underbelly, sending him flying and tumbling down the road.
Skidding to a stop on his side, he gasped for breath before standing again, spitting a glob of miratoxin and blood onto the ground-- and after a moment's thought, quickly scuffing up a handful of dirt over it.

The copper leupak took hold of the tip of its tail, pulling it out to form a long, springlike whip. It beckoned with its free hand, its face frozen into a cocky smirk as it spun its new weapon in the air like a bola.
Cazwell took a few steps back, carefully sizing up his opponent. The leupak was massive and sturdy, with a hulking back and short, powerful limbs. It appeared to be encased in armor from head to toe, with rubbery flesh showing through the gaps.
Its eyes were ringed by a set of mock glasses engraved into the metal-plated face below its glowing miracrystal facet.

Gritting his teeth, Caz slid on his other gauntlet and charged, eyes on the gaps in the creature's armor.
He slashed with one hand and then the other, desperate to land a blow even as the copper reptile parried each swing, lashing out with its elongated tail. The blunt weapon had little effect, bouncing harmlessly off of Cazwell's scales when it landed a hit.
Finally, his claws struck true, digging deeply into the thick hide of the leupak's neck. But they struck something hard inside, and no blood fell.

Instead, Cazwell recieved a brutal shock for his troubles.
With a horrible shriek, he ripped the claw out again, tumbling onto his back as his body trembled and his teeth chattered in his head.

The copper leupak--the *robot*-- snaked its tail forward to tie Cazwell's wrists and ankles tight as he lay on his side.
"Gggff... you... what the hell are you?!
You knew about me-- *you're with the fucking Rose*--"
The robot focused on its work, carefully ensuring the strength of its bonds before examining Cazwell.

"*What am I?* Huh, what a question!
Do you mean me, or the remotely-controlled robot suit? 'Cause I'm a human at the moment, I think... hang on, let me check."

The radio voice fell silent for a moment. "Yup! Still human.
Hey-- you're a textbook case, you know. It's pretty interesting! Venomborne leupak with a grudge neglects his new nutritional requirements for too long and goes rogue.
The leupslayer angle's new, but the blind rage is all the same.
It's a bit of a tragic take on it that leaves a bit of a bad taste in my mouth... but it's not my job to deal with that part, I'm just a rehabilitator.

You've caused a *lot* of trouble for such a frail little guy," the robot said in a patronizing tone. "Don't worry, though-- we're gonna fix you up once we get you into a decent facility, and you'll be right as rain!
Now, how to transport you..? I don't think I thought that one through. Hmm..."

Cazwell's rage drained from him. Squinting, he stared at the robot's smug, bespectacled face. Something about it... something about its *voice*...

And in an instant, it clicked.

"...*Drew?* he murmured, shock icing down his spine.

The robot suddenly froze in place.

"Um, hang on a second. *Do I know you?*"

Book VII Ch 24: Damned If You Drew

The Limbo Peninsula, Chimre

"*Oh my freaking Chapter*," Cazwell murmured, wriggling helplessly from atop the robot's back as it carried him through the eerie, crystallized landscape just over Dreamsong's border. "You work for the fucking *Silent Rose*, Drew. How could you hide this from the family? This... everything is your fault!"

"Woah, *hang on*," the voice from the robot protested. "You needed work and I pulled strings like a Lassen shadowbox performer to get you a nice, relaxed, well-paying job because I cared and I wanted to help, you know? I wasn't secretly planning to get you turned into a rampaging leupak for my insidious master or anything. I won't deny you your bad luck or anger, but don't go pinning this on me, Caz.
"Sometimes stuff just happens, and there's no one you can rightly blame."

Cazwell gritted his teeth, staring up into the sky.
Strange, winged beasts with ribbonlike tails flew overhead, rustling the shining leaves as they pursued spherical birds and gargantuan, armored insects. He shivered, pressing his chin against his chest and closing his eyes.

Chimre was the last place on Valenth he had ever wanted to return to, and now he was being carried there against his will by his own blood-- the familial black sheep.

"But why lie? You said you'd gotten an *engineering job*, not--"

"I never lied, Cuzwell. I *am* an engineer. I just happen to be an engineer for the Rose-- and I do a bit of leupology work on the side. It was a hobby at first, but they liked my research, and human leupak rights advocates are rarer than pacifistic Renatus," Andrew laughed. "... probably because most of them don't stay that way."

"...*L-leupology*." Cazwell's stomach twisted. Could Andrew have saved his humanity if he had known...?
"Is this about the miratoxin thing when we were kids? Because seriously, I don't--"

"You never had anything against leupaks-- or, well, *anyone*-- when we were younger, Caz. This sounds like it's all a product of your accident, which is sort of understandable... but it still doesn't make it *fair*.
"That said," Drew admitted, "the miratoxin 'thing', as you put it... it probably tweaked my brain a little bit, yeah. It's hard *not* to take an interest in leupaks when you--"

"...*ate* every venom sample in the house? Yeah, I guess not."

The robot leupak's steady gallops only served to emphasize the awkward silence.

"...*Dreamwaker*, did you *know about that?* And here I thought I was a master at subtlety."

"Our parents were always in fits trying to find somewhere to hide the samples where 'we' couldn't get into them. *We* meaning *you*-- it's like you could smell the stuff or something," Caz laughed derisively.

"So the whole family knows... *Ohhh man*, they probably think I'm turning into a leupak!" Andrew laughed. "...*oh*. Sorry, Cuz."

Cazwell realized his bitter expression was only on display for the sky.

The robotic leupak marched into a tiny clearing where an unassuming shed sat among the glittering trees. Unlocking the door with a claw, it entered, descending into a laboratory filled with metal parts, toolboxes, half-full jars of colorful goo and baskets of dimly-glowing miracrystal.

Near the back of the room, a well-dressed and chubby man sat behind a button-laden console, tapping and turning and switching the controls as he carefully watched on his monitor.

"Aah, home sweet ho-- *whoops*, I forgot."

The man turned in his chair, smiling brightly and adjusting his glasses as he got to his feet, guiding the robot across the room and to a stop before him.

"It's been a while, Caz. I'd ask how you're doing, but I just replaced my favorite glasses a few days ago. I might cry if you punched me and broke them!"

Pleased to have the opportunity at last, Cazwell glared furiously at him. "I'd love to, Drew, but I'm a little tied up. I'll have to save it for later."

"Aw, see? You're still a nice kid." Andrew smirked.

"Mmm. How long *has* it been? Two or three years?"

"Yeah, that sounds about right."

"That's pretty impressive, Drew. What've you, doubled your weight since the last time I saw you?" Caz sniffed, raising an eyebrow.

But Andrew was unfussed; he grinned widely, shuffling closer to look his reptilian cousin in the eye as he drummed his sides appraisingly.
"Oh, do you think? It must be something in the water-- you know what they say about Chimre.
"But I can't say for sure; no one's said anything to my face at the past few family reunions. Speaking of, it's a shame you haven't been coming to those anymore, Cuz. We all miss your little woobie face *so* much!"

"I'm not letting anyone see me like this. It's bad enough Elliot had to deal with me before I joined the Firestarters," Cazwell grumbled.

Andrew snorted. "You accidentally get turned into a leupak, and you think anyone'd give you a hard time about it? Caz, you realize you're a *Christoph*, right? Passive aggression is our *lifeblood!*
"If anyone says anything about you, it'll never be with you in the room-- hell, I promise you I've been wining and dining with the best of them out here since I came, and the worst I've gotten back home for my stunning new figure were a few frankly *hysterical* looks, even when I try to goad them into talking.
"It makes going to family gatherings worth it-- I've bugged every house they've been held at so I can giggle at all the crazy nonsense that gets said behind the scenes and play up my performance for next time.
"Anyone worth bothering with will keep their shitty opinions to themselves, or at least be honest and upfront with you. The rest of 'em? Laugh, and get on with your life."

"Um... thanks, I think?" Caz said, confused. "So, can I get down now? I think my circulation is cut."

"Right, right. Forgive me-- I love catching up with the family, after all. How's Ellie?"

Andrew leaned back over his control panel, directing the robotic leupak towards a small room in the back, furnished with a bed, a shelf full of books, a miniature bathroom and an odd, buttoned panel in one wall.
The robot turned, backed carefully into the doorway, and unraveled its tail from around Cazwell.

As he dropped onto all fours, the door slid and locked firmly into place behind him; he slammed into it several seconds too late to make an escape.

"Sorry, little buddy. I have to rehabilitate you before you can go anywhere. Tough love sucks, but I promise I'll take the best care of you I can," Drew explained apologetically as Caz snarled and pawed at his aching head.

"I don't need any damned rehabilitation! I don't care who you are, I'll *tear you apart when I get out of here!!*
"You're a fucking Rose sympathizer anyway-- You're a disgrace to the family name! *You're everything that's wrong with Valenth!*"

"Cazwell," Andrew said with a hint of sadness, "you're not well at all, and I definitely don't think you mean that.
I don't think you meant to hurt anyone, either, knowing how you've always been.
"I'm going to get some proper food into you, and you'll see what a massive difference it makes afterwards."

"I don't want your fucking Chimri food, either. I won't take your poison! I *won't*!" Cazwell cried, throwing himself against the glass again in a blinding rage, trying in vain to break it any way he could.
But he only succeeded in exhausting himself, dropping back onto the floor and gasping for breath.

Andrew watched with his arms folded across his belly, waiting patiently for him to finish.

"...Caz. Listen to me, *please.* Think whatever you want about the Silent Rose, alright? I don't care if you think we go around eating babies all day and kicking puppies into vats of miraplasm, if that's what gets you up in the morning.
"But I'm not here to spread propaganda or poison you or any of that. I do what I do because I care about something most people refuse to think about, and I'm doing *this* because I don't want you or any other innocent people to be hurt for no reason. I don't want to try and change your point of view about *anything*.
"But what you believe or don't believe won't change the reality of the fact that you're *really freaking sick*, and if you don't take the medicine I have to give you, you're *not going to be a person anymore*."

Cazwell froze, looking up at his cousin through the glass door.

"Wh... what do you mean, *'not a person anymore'?*"

"What you need to understand about leupaks, Caz, is that they're people, but they're *not* human. They're not like other species naturally born on Valenth, either... really, they're more like *aliens* than anything else. There's something about them that makes it necessary for a leupak-- any leupak, not just natural-born ones-- to eat the flesh and blood of other people to stay sane.
"It's why Chimre is full of blood banks and donation centers and, yeah, clone farms. The country does everything it can to make sure leupaks *don't* have to hurt anybody to exist.

"But the thing is, if they *don't?* They eat away their own consciousness instead, until there's nothing left and they go rogue, rampaging around like mindless beasts... well, because they *are* at that point. *That's* how you get the *real* monsters, Caz.

"Worse, that's exactly what's happening to *you*-- and by the sound of it, your anger over your involuntary transformation has made a *hell* of a convenient cover for it."

Cazwell backed away from the door, lying his ears back flat against his head in shock.

"I... I don't want to eat *people*!"

"I know, Caz. But this is the only way to do it without hurting anyone-- or in a few more months, you'll be doing it whether you want to or not and *lots of people will die*, and it'll probably be the ones you used to love, first.
"*Like Elliot.*"

The little leupak burst into tears, curling into a ball against a far corner of the room.

"No... no, I can't-- I don't know what to do, Andrew. I'm so tired of all this... this anger, but I... but you said..."

"It's not you, little guy. It's the disease, *I promise.* I've seen this so many times," Andrew said softly, settling on his knees beside the door.
"Will you let me help you? If I fail, I'll open the door and you can eat me first. You'd be full and okay for a little while longer, at least," he laughed with a pained little smile.

"O-okay," Cazwell said miserably, pressing his paws to his face. "But... but, Drew. If it works, what then? C-can I go back home? ...will I even belong in the Firestarters anymore? What have I *done with my life?*"

Andrew sighed, shaking his head. "I honestly don't know, Cuzwell. After your rehab's complete, I'm legally obligated to turn you in to the Government for multiple counts of non-predatory murder."

Book VII Ch 25: Thin Air

Solar
Psyche, The Reverie

Between the cerulean sky stretching endlessly over the horizon, the solid cloud path swirling like a vortex beneath his feet, and the White Boralion, mind-numbingly immense against his tiny and insignificant form, Gabriel felt like a mote of dust suspended high above a reality he could no longer comprehend.

Perhaps the feeling was more than mildly appropriate.
"This is your new home-- a perch from which you can gaze down upon Borealis and the rest of Psyche with ease.
"All iicarn report here once their duties are complete, and in time, you'll come to learn and love all of the swirling paradoxes that make the Reverie... well, *itself*."
With a rumbling and contented purr like a massive cat, the Dreamwaker wrapped his great tail around the cloud-road behind him and squeezed, wringing raindrops out and into the world beneath them.

They fell for an eternity, through the gaping hole in the earth with teeth of miracrystal, into the sprawling green fields of the leupaks' cavern-city far below.
Gabriel wondered if they had landed upon some unfortunate reptile's head, leading them to believe that they had aquired their own personal raincloud.

Perhaps Nef would give him one if he asked nicely; it'd only be fitting.

"It's all very, um, lovely," he began. "But why are we here?"

Eyeing the soft and pliable fluff being constricted by the giant leupak's tail, he wasn't quite convinced he *wouldn't* sink through the clouds to his death at any moment.

"Oh, *Gabe*. It's time for your flying lessons!" Nefirian announced triumphantly, spreading his opalescent wings for emphasis.

"...Dreamwaker, you have *got* to be kidding me," he swore.

The Dreamwaker tilted his head, three brows raised in unison. "Did you just use my name in vain?"

"...um..."

The beast laughed, his striped tongue flashing in his mouth. "I'm only messing with you."
Gathering up a pile of clouds in his forepaws, he idly shaped them into fat little leupaks. "You'll learn to fly first, and then you'll be given your weapons and trained in their use.
No, no, don't look that way-- you're not a military iicarn, but I still want you to be able to defend yourself when you need it, and you'll have to learn how to use a dartgun efficiently. Then we'll issue you your mask, and you can flutter off into the world and set to work!"

"Right. So, what is this going to involve, exactly?"

Nef eyed the cloud-leupaks curiously, then snapped one up into his jaws with a swift dip of his head, gulping it down like a mouthful of nougat. "You'll be using your powers to lure rare creatures out to you. You tranq them or otherwise incapacitate them, take blood and tissue samples, and then let them go.
You'll be free to take field notes of anything you find for your own research, of course-- it's the samples I'm interested in, preferrably a sample for every extant species on Valenth capable of providing them."

"That's a tall order. But did I really need to be an iicarn to do it? If I was good at anything, it was getting things to try to eat and/or kill me," Gabe sighed, flitting his wings nervously. "I could've--"

"Humans are *fragile*, Gabriel." The leupak flopped onto his side, twisting his neck to eye him right-side up. "Most humanoids I've assigned this task two have wound up mincemeat in a matter of days. I needed something that could bend reality to its will, ever so slightly, and also keep up with the things I'm after *before* ending up in their stomachs.
The same things that make you dangerous to yourself and others are the traits that make you well-suited to such a task... and it turns out Splitcha may have made a small error in your files."

Gabe frowned. "Then why would you decide to use me anyw--"

"You're a *resistant little bastard*, that's why," Nef grinned. "I'm a reference point for the psionic litmus test, and you were absolutely determined to struggle against *my will* to the bitter end.
You're *fascinating as hell*, but the truth is I can't risk working with you personally for too long if you get too emotional on me.
You wouldn't like to see me go rogue very much.
Neither would anyone else... and *that includes me, incidentally*."

The iicarn stared at his master in uneasy silence. "Let's get this over with, Lord-Doctor."

Nefirian rose to all fours with an affirmative grunt, unraveling his tail and stepping up to the edge of the cloudy path.
"There's not a whole lot I can tell you for this, Gabe. You've got to try until you figure it out on your own. Trust your wings and don't focus too much on what should be happening, just go with it! If you can't fly in the Reverie, there's no way you'll ever manage on Valenth."
"Right," Gabe muttered, standing on the edge and gazing down at the world below as his knees quaked. "So how do I--"

"JUMP!"

Gabriel launched himself into the air in pure terror-- and realizing he was falling quite fast did little to soothe it.
He tried to spread his wings against the thundering wind, arching his back and lifting his arms out and biting his lip and drawing in a deep breath--
and he smashed into the grassy earth with a bone-crushing *crack*.

Sighing as if he'd seen this a thousand times before, Nefirian slithered off of his perch in the clouds, swooping easily down to land before Gabriel as he peeled himself off of the ground, his broken neck and bones snapping back into place as he crawled dizzily to his knees.

"D..d...did I do it? Did I fly?!"

The White Boralion's expression was unreadable.
He lovingly gathered Gabriel to his breast, leaping skyward to fly back up to Solar's outer edges again.

"Eheh... not in a conventional sense, no.
But don't feel discouraged-- everybody starts out like this. You won't hurt yourself in any meaningful way here, so you'll want to get all of these embarassing spills out of your system while you can. Death is no big deal in the Reverie, if you're paying attention."

Gabe gritted his teeth, flopping back onto the clouds as Nef released him. "I don't know how effective an approach that was. How many dirt angels do I have to make with my face before I get the hang of this?"

But Nef pressed a claw to Gabe's lips, patting his head gently with his free hand. "You'll get it-- I believe in you, Gabriel.
I desperately wish I could stay to see it when you do, but there's something very important I need to take care of back on Valenth," he said, glancing over his shoulder.
"I have a friend on the way who'll take over from here. I'm sure he'll have you soaring with the best of them in no time!"

"A friend? Don't tell me you're giving up on me *already!*"

"Of course not. I'll see how you're doing when I return! Good luck, Gabriel!"

Before Gabe could protest, the White Boralion launched himself into the air and was gone, winging gracefully into the distance. A strong hand dropped onto Gabriel's shoulder from behind.

"He-hey, buddy! It looks like you're having a little trouble comprehending the *gravity* of the situation. Maybe I can help," said Giovan with a cool smile, drifting effortlessly over the void.

Book VII Ch 26: Requiem for the Sky

The Cathedral of a Thousand Roses
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Nigel ignored the frantic tittering of Nefirian's faerie servants as he stared up at the towering spires of the cathedral before him.

Taking a slow drag from his cigarette, he pulled it away from his lips and let the smoke spiral and curl away. His eyes rolled downward to the rose garden at his feet, countless little white flowers sparkling in the golden sunrise.

Lilendril's inane chatter grew more heated as the old man casually tapped his cigarette's ash onto one of the pristine flowers.

"Shouldn't you be preparing for the big bang, faeling?" he asked with a smile, not bothering to turn to face him.

The Nightmare Receptacle
Psyche, The Reverie

A hundred slick tentacles danced and twisted in the dark as the Oneroi drew a deep and quivering breath, its eyes flickering and focusing on the little *Aeneski* atop its lap.

It seemed to consider her for a moment as the teeth in its three mouths chattered and gnashed.

"Ooh, you're antsy today. What's up?" Reks asked brightly, taking hold of a tentacle in each hand and swinging them like ropes.

The Oneroi burbled and gasped. Eyes growing wide, its gelatinous white skin twitched and darkened, dissolving away into a ghastly black pool of ooze at Reks' feet.

"Woah... oh man ohmanohman. Is it time *already?!* I wanna see too!" she cried, leaping up into the inky black chamber and vanishing.

Crystal Tunnels, Subterranea

It began with a single whisper; the barest, faintest murmur as the kassen made their way through the tunnels they knew so well.

But one became two, and two became twenty, and in an instant the crystals were singing with millions of voices all at once. The cacophony was unprecedented, and the tunneldwellers drank their beer and clutched their dreamshards and clamped their palms to their heads, desperate to shut them up.
Nothing worked, and they settled onto the floor in great, pained heaps, pleading to the spirits to forgive them for any wrongs they had committed.

As the crystals sang ever louder, they began to glow-- and Dree Doomfury heard a familiar voice shouting above the din.

She stared into the miracrystals, and three eyes stared back.

Bordello of the Disciples
Gier, South Dreamsong

The Bordello exploded into activity, erosions scattering to the windows and doors in all directions in an effort to find the source of the energy vibrating through their bones and into their souls.
Their minds whirled and buzzed as one, brimming with questions no one could answer and demands no one could meet. As Remy slipped wordlessly from his private chambers, they flocked around him with pleading and expectant eyes eager for any scrap of knowledge to be had.

"Shh," he said gently, and the Bordello grew silent.

Satisified, the Chapter of Matter made his way peacefully through the grand hall and out the front door, followed by a long train of his anxious and curious Disciples.

Andrew's Workshop
The Chimri Wilds, Chimre

"What the hell was that?" Cazwell's voice cut through the peace of his cousin's lab.

He pressed his paws to the diamondglass door of his little room, his long ears pressed flat against his head.

Andrew looked up from his desk, a licorice whip hanging from his lips and his feet propped up upon the furniture.
Pausing a moment and wrinkling his nose, Drew swallowed the last of the candy before getting to his feet.

"*That*, Cuzwell, was a *hell* of a mirajin spike," he announced finally. "They happen every now and then, but this... I can feel it crackling over my *skin*."

And through my blood, he thought.

"A mirajin spike? *Why*?" Cazwell began to pace, his stumpy tail wiggling nervously. "It's overwhelming! What would cause such a thing?"

Stopping before a mirror hung on the wall, Andrew eyed his dreamshard earring; it glowed softly, pulsing and flashing.

"... If my hunch is right, Caz, you *really* don't wanna know. Wait here!" he chirped, heading for the door.

"It's not like I *have a choice*!" Cazwell grumbled.

Grey's Office
MIRACLE Energy Headquarters
Gier, South Dreamsong

Elliot gazed quietly out over the sunset, the sky aflame with brilliant hues of red and orange. Her beverage sat untouched upon Grey's desk beside the handwritten letter; she'd come here as soon as she'd read it, and he had done his best to console her, promising to help however he could.

"Who'd kidnap a leupak is what I want to know," Grey said, scratching his chin. "They're pretty damn big, venomous and kinda bitey. If it's not a ransom of some kind directed towards your family, what's the big idea?"

"It wouldn't be," Elliot said softly. "The Christophs are one of the most powerful families on Valenth, Grey-- it'd be suicide, and anyone with the means to pull it off successfully wouldn't have a reason to. I think there's more to this than--"

"Hey, hang on. Did you just feel the building sh--"

With a crackling and thunderous roar, the suns vanished instantly, swallowed by a great and shimmering violet bubble that swelled upon the horizon.

Grey rushed to the window, staring in fascinated horror with Elliot as the world trembled around them and the sky unraveled before their eyes.

Firewing Base Camp
Whimsy Forest, South Dreamsong

The Firestarters dashed through the camp, gathering supplies and weapons, launching their message-birds and sending scouts out into the woods as the Glass Marionette-- minus Didier-- reunited just outside, their eyes to the sky above.

"What's *happening* out there?" Cami asked softly, wrapping their arms around their chest and frowning. "There's so much energy... it... it *hurts."*

"Don' worry, sweetie," Harley said, wrapping her burly arms around Cami in a comforting hug. "Whatever it is, we're in good hands an' good company-- these guys live for stuff like this. It'll probably be over before y'know it!"

Standing just behind them, Lyric'ai gritted his teeth as his wings flickered and flashed in and out of existence.

Cami was right; mirajin was flowing through the area with in enormous quantity. It was almost too much for him to resist, and his body was struggling to break free of its tiny container and soak it all in despite his greatest wishes.

He didn't want to find out what the Firestarters would think of a sudden boralion-- let alone *him personally*-- in their midst.

I'm proud of you, I really am, he thought. *But why* now?

Dragonsbreath Vale
Aqk's Peak, Schalle

The dragons felt the massive blast of mirajin coursing over their scales long before they saw the violet bubble swelling in the distance. Several excitable youths tore through and over the trees into Casarilinia's grove, shrieking and snarling like furious golden birds, eager to be the first to deliver the news.

But she had known before they had even ended their ceaseless quarreling and dominance displays; it had been the faintest crackle over her nostrils, a light chill up her great spine.

She glowered down at the young Flarions with distaste.

"Looking for action, are you?" She sneered. "Rouse the others; we're off to incinerate that damnable artifact *once and for all*."

As the Renatus Purifico took to the devastated skies, a horrible and agonized trumpet rang out over the mountain peak.

Valdren thrashed within his isolated glade, uprooting crystallized plants and shrubs with wild lashes of his tail and his mighty wings. A pair of shining quartz antlers adorned his head where his horns once were, and painful crystal eruptions had punched through his golden scales like spearheads. His tongue lashed, the tip split into three parts, and his once-golden eyes had multiplied and turned a horrible red.

His children ignored him as they flew overhead, save the occasional frightened glance from young dragons with too much curiosity to resist a look.

This was the stark and irresistable fate of those who tampered with forbidden powers; the contagious and disfiguring touch of the Fatis Mirajin that even Valdren himself could not conquer.

"Please," Valdren moaned, digging his claws deep into the rocky soil as his body shook and convulsed. "Kelan... Nefirian... one of you *must* hear me... Don't let me fade away like this. I don't want to hurt anymore, but I don't want to disappear. I don't want to die. "*Please!*"

At once, his muscles failed him, and he curled into a limp heap amongst the uprooted plants and broken crystals, closing his myriad eyes as new vegetation grew to fill in the gashes and gaps in the glade.

"Oh," he gasped in surprise. "It... it's you. *Thank you...*"

And when the sire of the Flarion dragonflight rose again, it rose with the mindless hunger of one whose soul has fled the body forever.

It spread its golden wings and screamed.

The Flamekeeper's Cabin
The Firestarters' Campgrounds
Heaven's Pillar Forest, Aensdoun

"Something is wrong," Dilndrou said softly, narrowing his eyes as he glanced away from his book. "Kelan, can you feel it? The elements are..."

His voice trailed away to silence-- but before he could utter another word, Kelan leapt to his feet and threw himself out of the cabin.

"*We're* too late!" he cried as he took wing.

The sky fell to pieces before his eyes, shattering like glass as a vivid and otherworldly light flared far beyond the trees, swallowing the suns and the atmosphere and leaving only stark, cold space.

He was in the air and aflame before he understood what he was seeing; he flew against the wind, against the overwhelming pulse of mirajin battering at him.

You are responsible for the very thing you crusade against!
Dietrich's words echoed cruelly in Dilndrou's head as he made his way out to the ranks of astonished and terrified scouts and rangers.

At his command, the Firestarters gathered their dragons and griffins and flew for Chimre after Kelan.

"I am indeed responsible," he murmured with guilty tears in his eyes as his mount took to the sky-- a memory of Aqk's golden wings holding them aloft. "It's time to correct the mistakes of my past. For my lost companions... for Valenth.

"*And for Ennysh.*"

The Cathedral of a Thousand Roses
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

Eva wasn't certain what to make of the company she was keeping.

Na'than had asked her if she wanted to watch history in the making, but there wasn't much happening in this random hallway in the Cathedral, even if the double-doors before them *were* quite pretty, and the people they were waiting with *were* quite fascinating.

A stout, white-haired cierne man with a tiny golden star in his hair adjusted his bifocles across the hall, checking his colorful rainbow clothing and cape for any sign of dust or wear. Nearby, a startlingly humanoid leupak lounged calmly beside the double doors, looking for all the world like a little scheming cat.

Na'than himself was a few steps down the hall, pacing around like the excitable puppy he tried so hard *not to be* whenever he worked in public.

And inside the room behind the doors, *something* was going on.

Na'than had warned her to take her strongest miracrystal with her before they'd made their way here-- wherever *here* was.
She assumed they were closer to the Fatis Mirajin here than anywhere else in the Dreamwaker's palace... which made her a bit reluctant to know what was *really* happening within that room, now that she thought about it.

"So, um... what's all this "history" supposedly going on, then? Is anything actually going to happen out here?" She asked, breaking the tense silence.

The leupak glanced up at her and grinned, and the half-*Aeneski* tilted his head.

"Well... how much do you know about Valenth? The Prime Elements, the nature of the Chapters, that sort of thing?"

"Not much at all," Eva admitted. "I know the Chapters stand for soul, mind, and... um, *stuff*, but that's more or less it. Other than the Firestarters being a little bit nuts, and the Rose dealing in everything scientific, I didn't think there was anything more behind it other than a ton of odd rumors."

"Truth can often be stranger than fiction," Dietrich said. "The Prime Elements are considered essential parts of life and living things on Valenth; without vitae, there is no soul or personality, and without mirajin, there is no logic or imagination. It's believed among some circles that Valenth and the Reverie are two parts of the same whole, just like vitae and mirajin.
"In the next room--"

Anderson cleared his throat loudly.

"Hey, old man. Don't go spilling confidential information, hmm? Some of us take great pains to keep it under wraps," he grinned with a wink, tossing his curly blonde hair casually. "The Lord-Doctor would be *heartbroken* if he had to send his favorite assassin to neuter his favorite cat."

Dietrich stared at Andy in slack-jawed shock, which set him to whooping laughter.

Frowning, Eva glanced out the window at the starry sky. "Weren't the suns just coming up?"

The loud-mouthed flower faerie wandered away across the gardens to play with the swans; Nigel had had enough of his lip, and he knew far too much about the nature of the Reverie to endure it for a second longer.

With a smirk, he glanced up at the Cathedral again, tossing his lit cigarette carelessly into a nearby rosebush.

"...*three*," he announced with a triumphant laugh.

Lifting his arms, his form melted away, leaving only a tiny black bat which fluttered upwards into the bare sky-- vanishing amongst the stars and the dark as hundreds of golden dragons came into view over the horizon.

Book VII Finale: The Broken Silence

Several hundred... no.

Several thousand *years ago, a child was born. There was nothing special about him, save perhaps the color of his hair.*

His people came to call him Ban'leane-- witch-child-- although he was not much of a witch at all.

He fought to survive in a tribe full of people who feared and hated him, finding some small solace in two unlikely friends and a harsh god who sought to turn him into an alchemist.

He failed the final test, and on that day, he died.

On that same day several thousand years ago, a Crystal was born, and the being that was once the Ban'leane was bound to it as its Keeper.

Every day, the Crystal and its Keeper grew a little bigger, and a little stronger, and a little smarter.
The things the Crystal touched became magical, growing into fantastical things along with it-- including the Keeper and their two companions.

In time, the crystal and its new friends became too much for the little village to contain. There was too much magic, and the people who had been so cruel to the Ban'leane had become as monstrous on the outside as they were in their hearts.

The Crystal sang to its keeper, and the Keeper devoured the furious creatures that haunted the village.

Their work complete at last, they left.

The Keeper and the Crystal traveled the world, searching for answers to the questions that plagued them.
What did it mean to be alive? What did it mean to exist? What made beasts move and plants grow?

What made things change?

They journeyed as far as they could go, learning all the secrets of the planet and the secrets within themselves.
They collected every secret they could find, and became quite good at keeping them.

As they learned and explored, the Keeper came to a startling realization; the world within their mind was far kinder than the world without.
People hurt and suffered and died for the worst reasons or no reason at all-- and they hurt and tortured and killed other people just the same.

But within themself, pain and death and sorrow were fleeting; possibility was limited only by thought, and suffering was unnecessary... optional.

The Keeper withdrew, tinkering in secret with the Crystal by their side.

And as they learned, they grew and changed-- and the world without grew and changed as well.

Years came and went, nations rose and fell, and the Keeper's children lived and died.

And one day, when the Keeper awoke, the Crystal sang to them again, and the Keeper understood.

Everything they had learned and all of the secrets they had kept were ready to be used. They were to be crafted into the finest gift the world would ever recieve.

The Keeper worked for years, hopeful that at last the time had come to set all things right.
There would be no more pain, death, or suffering. There would be nothing but discovery and dreams and possibility for all of time.

And when they were satisfied, the Keeper rose to their feet with the Crystal, and the Silence was finally broken.

The Mirajin Throne
The Cathedral of a Thousand Roses
Laps-du-Ment, Chimre

The Fatis Mirajin shone brilliantly in the light of the rising suns-- and out beyond the broken mountains, a thousand crystal pillars glowed in unison, setting the world aflame in magenta.

Nefirian gazed upon the sight with tears in his eyes.

Everything is in place.

In finely ground crystal powder, he drew a circle around the perimeter of the great room, intricate lines and symbols leading from the Fatis Mirajin out into the world; temporary arcane channels to funnel the power into the heart of Chimre.

He carefully stepped over them with bare feet, pressing his palms against the Fatis Mirajin, warm and pulsing in time with the beat of his own heart.

No one will know anything was ever any different.
No one will know anything has changed.

And it won't matter.

"No," he said softly. "It won't matter anymore."

He rested his forehead against the great crystal, his thoughts leading back through history-- back through secrets and wars and hatred, back to a tiny pocket in time when he and the artifact were the only things that mattered in the world.

Back to his death and birth.

And in the gentle calm of morning, he heard the Fatis Mirajin laugh, and he finally understood; he'd been hearing his own voice resonating through the crystal all along.

Rising to his full height, Nefirian Dreamscar looked out upon the world, lifting his hands into the air as a hundred thousand words filled his mind.

"VALENTH! AWAKEN, AND EMBRACE YOUR NEW REALITY!"

He heard the Fatis Mirajin whispering his thoughts, colored by the vibrations of singing crystal.
The room grew dark as the artifact drank in the sunlight, the lines of brilliant powder crackling and flowing with energy.

The Mirajin sang out loud, and as the floor began to vibrate, the Cathedral followed suit, and the earth with it.
The crystals of Mimore heard the cry and answered in kind, flaring white-hot as they keened their eerie, painful melody.

The sky filled with a million colors, swirling like an opalescent bubble as the Fatis Mirajin called.
And in a great, crashing roar, it drew in the pulsing energy from the crystal pillars and the sky and the suns themselves.
The sky tore open, shattering like glass to reveal the cosmos beyond.
Time slowed, and crawled, and *stopped*, and in that eternal moment, the crystals' song dulled to a low, trembling bellow.

Nefirian collapsed to his knees, his third eye ripping open as miraplasm dripped sticky and pink from his curling lips.
He pressed his palms against the floor and arched his back, hair tumbling down around his face as his body fought to contain itself, muscles twitching and thrashing just beneath the skin.

He felt his mind soaring beyond himself, into the spaces torn through the fabric of reality. He saw Laps-du-Ment and Ros Albion and Jetersborough and Axl and Soril, bristling with the power of his eternal dream.
He felt the edges of the Veil expanding, sucking in the waking world and all its harsh, hard limits, leaving only infinite impossibility.

And then, as swiftly as the momentum grew, he felt it slam to a *stop*.

He felt a barrier of vitae pressing against his ultimate will; he felt an ancient power shift and struggle against the whirling Dream.

He saw the faces of the people of Dreamsong as the Veil rose into the sky above them, devouring all it could reach.

In his mind's omniscient eye, he saw the dragons of Schalle launching themselves into the broken sky, furious and intent.
Just beyond them, he heard a soft and trembling voice cry for help, held captive within a crystal glade just moments from oblivion.
He answered with a whisper, and as the Renatus took wing, their sire's warped body spread his own and screamed as the last fragments of his tormented soul fled into the flowing unreality of dreams.

In Gier, he felt the regret of a lost heart and a broken mind, buzzing with realized potential and suppressed grief.

In Aensdoun, he saw the launch of a vengeful comet, soaring as fast as sound on wings of flame.

And in Laps, in the Cathedral of a Thousand Roses which had fused perfectly with the dream, Nefirian Dreamscar Awoke with a trembling and painful and triumphant cry as the comet crashed through the window.

Kelan slammed through the glass, ignoring the bite of the shards tearing through his feathers and skin.
He landed among the dreamshards and the dust, his wings burning bright as he rose to his feet and looked down with fury and hatred upon the Dreamwaker, hunched pitiably upon his knees. "The greatest mistake of my life was letting you *live*."

"It wasn't supposed to work this way," Nef whispered, drawing in a slow breath as his three eyes gleamed.
He felt a million thoughts shifting and swirling just beneath the pulse of his own mind-- voices of people he had never seen or known.
He pushed them out, for now. "Something's gone wrong..."

"I wanted so badly to believe you weren't the cold, scheming, heartless monster everyone made you out to be, Nefirian.
I hoped against hope that you were mad, but you meant well..."

"Can't you see, Kelan? Nothing's changed...
I tried my best to change the world... to make it perfect and harmless and free for *you*..."

"WHY IN HELL WOULD I WANT THIS?!" Kelan cried. "YOU'VE TORN A HOLE THROUGH REALITY!
Everything between Axl and Soril has been transformed into a waking nightmare. The natural order has been defiled... no, *destroyed!*
Beasts and mutants walk the streets, and the people *can't even register their own fear!* Their own *existence!*

Valenth's balance was disrupted by your fucking crystal from the start, Nefirian, but now the mirajin has begun to devour the entire world. And *all you can say for yourself is that there's BEEN A MISTAKE?!*"

Kelan drew his swords, moving forward-- but Nefirian vanished instantly.
Spinning, he found the little Chapter standing several feet behind him, gazing solemnly out the window, his crimson hair flowing like water around his shoulders and face.
"Valenth and the Reverie are two parts of a whole... two seperate worlds which every creature is irrevocably tied to, body, mind, and soul.

But we can only exist in one or the other at a time, and most people feel the Reverie is nothing more than a shadow realm, a realm where dreams play out and then vanish forever," he said softly.
"What if the two were merged, Kelan? What if vitae and mirajin were part of a whole that were never meant to be seperated in the first place? What if Valenth and the Reverie were meant to work as *one*, rather than two sides of a coin?"

"You're insane. You're fucking *insane* and you've *gone too far!*"

"Nothing's changed, Kelan. I'm as miserable a witch as I've always been," Nef laughed sadly.

"I did my best, I took all my notes, I researched for *years and years and years* and took my time and I *still failed*..."

"THIS ISN'T ABOUT YOU, YOU MISERABLE DEMON!" Kelan screamed. "You've thrown the entire world into chaos on a mad hypothesis you could've never proven!
Even if you meant well-- as if I'd ever believe your lies again--, I can't let you live!"

In the blink of an eye, Nefirian had crossed the room; he held his gleaming mirametal rapier at the ready, his face a mask of pain and anger.
"No one could ever let me live, Kelan. That's just it... I was something profane from birth-- weren't you paying attention?
Come on and kill me, then, if that's what you're here to do. *I'm ready*."

Kelan snapped his wings, launching himself across the room. His swords met Nefirian's rapier with a vibrant clang, and the dance began.

They circled and spun, Kelan advancing viciously with blow after blow from the two halves of Lifesedge, his eyes glowing with anger. Nefirian deflected every swing with Mentalie, the mirametal sword throwing off glimmering magenta sparks as it collided with the Flamekeeper's legendary weapons.

"Everything I've suffered these past years... it's all been punishment for my failure to deal with you!" Kelan snarled, bearing down with his blades again and again. "I lamented and wallowed in my despair, instead of seeing the reality of the situation... I allowed so many people to suffer at your hands, yet thought only of myself!"

"I've searched my entire life to find a way to minimize suffering in this horrible world," Nef gasped.
"A world that's done so much to tear apart innocent people who deserved nothing more than all the love and comfort everyone else was entitled to.
People like *you*, people who insist on your damnable crusades in the name of justice and nature and any other excuse you can come up with to decide who lives and who dies, who should be judged instead of being helped and nurtured, led away from their pain...
No. You're *the ansiban!* You're *the fucking monsters!!*
And you know what, Kelan?"

Kelan's swords tore through the air where Nefirian's neck had been a moment before.
"...*I've had enough*."

His disembodied voice echoed through the chamber, resonating in the Fatis Mirajin, vibrating the windows, and quaking the foundations of the Cathedral around them.

Nefirian hit him like a train.

Kelan sailed across the room, slamming into the floor only momentarily before being launched into the air again as Nefirian blinked in and out just long enough to throw another punch faster than the mind could register, leaving nothing in his wake but thin streaks of miraplasm and a faint afterimage of his former location.

The barrage continued, relentless and brutal; the Flamekeeper struggled to take wing, to break the chain, to escape-- but Nef grabbed him again and again, gripping his throat, throwing him across the room, hurling him into walls and ceiling with punches and kicks and telekinetic force.

At last, Kelan fell into a battered heap upon the floor as Nefirian flickered in behind him, crouched on all fours.
Gritting his teeth, his body warped, shifted, and swelled, and as his skin burst open and his robes fell away, he slithered monstrously out of them, bloated, gleaming and reptilian.

He drifted weightlessly above the fallen Chapter, his thick tail swishing slowly beneath him, his hair writhing with slick tentacles as his ears twitched and swiveled atop his head.

Kelan looked slowly, painedly up at him, trembling. "So... the horror that devoured my friend ages ago finally reveals its true face."

Nefirian laughed, cold and crystalline. "Don't be ridiculous, Kelan. *My faces are infinite*."

Visions of reptilian monsters danced through Kelan's mind, draped in spines and tentacles, wicked claws and ooze-dripping teeth. The White Boralion, immense and ominous; the Oneroi, slick and white and eldritch.
There were hulking, crocodilian beasts with striped tails, sinuous humanoid creatures with great, winglike streamers of trailing red hair, blind, bat-faced terrors with scythelike claws, and amorphous, slimelike things with flailing limbs in every direction and leering, masklike faces.

One towered over all the rest, great and sluglike in its mountainous bulk, with tentacles dancing down its spine and a horrible, toothy maw that cut across its face and into its broad and terrible shoulders.
It loomed, larger than the mind could register, great fountains of bubbling miraplasm oozing from its sharp and cavernous mouth.

They all gazed into the depths of Kelan's heart and mind with three piercing eyes-- two poison-green, one as brilliant magenta as the crystal that sat in the middle of the room.

"I am the Dreamwaker," he explained in a hundred thousand voices.

"I am the limitless expanse of the mind, the endless depths of dream, the heart of wishes and the lure of desire.
I am the Queen of all leupaks, the champion of Science, the mother of monsters, and the weaver of nightmares.
I am as much a force of nature as your wind and trees and rain-- I am as much a force of creation and life as your beloved vitae.

I am an indestructable, unquenchable part of you and everything on this planet, and *I WILL NEVER AGAIN SUBMIT!*"

As Nefirian's enraged cry rang in Kelan's ears and echoed in his heart, he realized with dim incredulity that he had been hurled through the window from which he had come, and he was falling.

As he tumbled slowly towards the earth looming above, Kelan thought about Dilndrou and Sasha and Aqk, about Selarion and Bastion and Valdren and Nefirian.

As the dragons rushed in overhead, he snuffed the sorrow in his heart and embraced the hard and rocky crush of the soil, and the reality of what he had to do.

And in his Cathedral in the center of the threshold between dream and reality, Nefirian roared.

Volume II

Book I Chapter 1: DIVIDE

I should have known it was going to end up like this. Centuries of meticulous preparation, all leading up to one moment of ultimate failure.

It'd be merciful if it all ended here-- but I know better than that.
And I know there's a reason why Nigel split, too... did he really think I wouldn't notice?
It's hard to miss these things when you're the embodiment of mirajin, and we were practically swimming in it even before I opened the Veil.

On the other hand, I let him and Chira lead me along from the start.

Well done, Nef-- and where has that left you?

On the precipice of war.

Well... I suppose I've been asking for it all along.

Cathedral of a Thousand Roses
Laps-Du-Ment, The Veil

Nefirian felt the dragons swooping in through the thick air of the dream long before he saw them.

Screaming a song of hatred and war, their golden wings shone in the pale light of the stars, their long necks craning to see the pearly spires that marked the home of the Fatis Mirajin.
Farther in the distance, the Firestarters winged in on their griffins and the few Flarions who had not deserted them-- but the Renatus dragons were the more immediate threat.

Squeezing his scaly bulk out of the hole Kelan had left in the window, the Dreamwaker crawled onto the tower, his crystalline claws and his iron will the only things keeping him from tumbling to the ground far below. The dragons spotted him at once, smoke pouring from their mouths as they swarmed, diving in to engage.

Casarilinia was nowhere to be found; Nef was disappointed, but hardly surprised.

Twisting his neck backwards to watch them descend, he released his physical and mental hold on the wall, drifting effortlessly in space for a moment before launching skyward, speeding into the flock with monstrous force.

He slammed head-first into one of the Flarions, digging his claws into its belly as it whipped around, scrabbling to dislodge him. Dropping easily away, he landed upon the back of another, racing down its spine and tail to leap off into nothing.

The golden beasts swam furiously through the air around him like ravening fish, jaws snapping and talons snatching to little effect. As he fell, another dragon swept downwards after him, flames dancing in its open mouth.

He turned his head to gaze almost fondly into its eyes-- and in an instant, the Flarion whipped around to spew a blast of searing fire into the face of one of its comrades, which screamed and thrashed and fell as its scales melted and bubbled away.

As the Renatus dragons began to struggle and fight amongst themselves, Nefirian landed harmlessly on the road below, curling and lashing

his tail as his three eyes surveyed the world around him.

He watched as the Firestarters suddenly turned in the air, swooping downwards and into the forests well away from the city walls.

Satisfied, he tore a hole through the paved stone road and slithered into the dark earth.

The Chimri Wilds
Chimre, The Veil

Kelan lay quietly in a great pile of fallen leaves and broken branches, the hard crystal edges of the mutant plants cutting into his skin and the gaps in his armor like tiny teeth. He sighed softly, wings twitching beneath him.

From far above, there was a shout; he opened his eyes to see a small group of griffins settle upon the canopy and in the grass nearby, their riders sliding off of their backs to approach him.

Dilndrou came last, his griffin accompanied by Ireliss, a grave expression upon her face.

"I'm unhurt," Kelan said softly.

"Nefirian is as well, it seems," Dilndrou replied, frowning. "By the looks of things, he's just singlehandedly eviscerated the better part of a raiding party of Renatus dragons."

"That's not surprising-- he *Awoke* just as I arrived at the Cathedral, and... well. I'm *here*, now," he said with a wry smile.
"I don't know what I expected, but... we can't face him here, and for the time being, I can't measure up to him alone. "

Kelan shifted forward onto his knees, picking the sharp leaves out of his flesh and tossing them away. "Do you understand what's happened?"

Ireliss sat beside him, curling her tail around herself. "This isn't Valenth anymore, is it? Not... not *really*."

"No, it isn't-- it's a facsimile of it, recreated within the Reverie.

This... *veil* Nefirian has torn open was meant to consume the entire planet, plunging the physical realm into dreams.
Had his plan succeeded, we would've been none the wiser; only skilled dreamers and psions can hold onto the strength of will to question the authenticity of a dream.
"They would've had the power to do anything they wished, literally-- reality is only as much of an obstacle as you believe it to be, in the Reverie. And naturally, the vast majority of the world's population would continue their lives-- or *pretend to*-- as they believed they should, unaware and *ultimately powerless to revolt* as long as they still subconsciously held themselves to the laws of the physical world."

Ireliss shivered.

"But the residual energies of the Eye of Elysia deflected the Fatis Mirajin's reach," Dilndrou mused. "The Veil expanded outward, but once it hit a substantial pocket of vital energy, it ground to a halt. That's why it only got as far as it did."

Kelan nodded. "It's more than far enough, though. Our one saving grace is that a sizable portion of Valenth is still intact, which was why we saw it happen and understood-- but the Reverie has begun to flow into the waking world, and the beasts that live within are free to pass between the realms as they wish.
"Worse, the amount of residual mirajin on Valenth has increased *exponentially* even outside of the Veil-- and worse still, several cities have been caught within the radius. Axl and Soril are just on the bubble's edge... and Jetersborough has been all but consumed.
"What this means for the people living there, I don't know, but the wildlife exposted to the veil have been mutating beyond recognition."

"To think that reality itself could become a precious commodity," Ireliss breathed. "What do we do now, Grandfather?
Between a dangerously-pronounced surplus of mirajin, mutants flooding into the physical realm, cities lost to the Veil, and a mad Chapter on the loose... how do we choose where to begin?"

"We take it one step at a time," he replied, finally rising to his feet.
"Nefirian is currently preoccupied with the Renatus Purifico-- that buys us some time to retreat. We need to learn what to expect now that Valenth has been so severely altered, and how to reclaim and restore as much as we possibly can to stabilize the planet and protect the people still on it.

"But the Veil will be a constant threat, likely in ways we can't yet imagine... and as long as Nefirian lives, he'll never allow us to seal it."

Book I Chapter 2: The Honest Truth

I've always considered myself a very observant and careful person; when my family quarreled and fought over the bigger picture, I found the truth was often hidden within the fine details. I dedicated my life to learning-- and I promised myself from the start that I would dig as far as I had to to find the reality inherent in everything.

Somehow, I managed to let all that slip when I came into direct contact with the entity known as Nefirian Dreamscar.

I had been studying and cataloguing the flora and fauna of Dreamsong when it first contacted me through a dream. It was interested in my work, as well as in the way I held myself when performing my research; even in the face of the most horrifying effects of mirajin radiation, I did my utmost to remain a neutral party, recording my findings in the interest of unbiased truth rather than to pander to any method of thought.
There were plenty of people in the world with agendas-- I saw no need to add to their ranks. I was interested only in performing the necessary task of understanding the world for what it was and spreading that information to anyone in need of it.

And so, when Nefirian asked me to come study under the Rose, I politely declined-- unaware that my dismissal would only enhance the creature's curiosity.

From that moment on, it came to me like a gatekeeper to the land of dreams, and we discussed many things before we went our seperate ways into the night. Every time, it would make its offer again, and every time, I would say no – a nightly ritual that led into discussions of the state of Valenth and the things within it, and all the science either of us could stand.
I learned things no mortal had any right to ever know from it-- and in return, it learned about the nature of people and their ways of life from me.
Even during its life as an Aeneski*, it had never truly lived as others do-- it had spent precious little time around other humanoids before its transformation into the creature it is now. I took it upon myself to teach it what life meant to humans and what it meant to have it taken away, as well as about human family and friends, human ambition and emotion.*

I taught it these things, without ever really considering the implications of needing to teach in the first place.
Not once did I question this until I stood with Grey Scott inside his office, staring in awe and horror as the Veil tore open, knowing that only one creature on Valenth could have possessed the means, the ambition, and the lack of human understanding to have conducted such a terrible event.

In my arrogance, I believed I could teach an entity thousands of years older and inconcievably more intelligent than myself the meaning of human empathy.

I had forgotten something vital, something as true as it is horrible.

Beings who are not raised as people have extreme difficulty becoming people well after the fact.

Christoph Biogenesis Laboratory
Somnambulist Project HQ
Gier, South Dreamsong

The laboratory was full of activity; technicians and researchers scurried to and fro with specimens, journals, paperwork and supplies as they worked tirelessly to uncover as much as possible about their new charges.
Elliot bit her lip as she gazed down into one of the cages. A small weasel peered back up at her, its nose twitching as it stood on its hind legs. Behind it, its tail curled and writhed-- the fur parted, giving way to a small green snake that hissed with great displeasure at the people making such a commotion around them.

"This is a common Dremish Stoat," Elliot explained softly. "We have at least ten more like this—displaying similar or other striking mutations-- brought in from the areas just around the city of Gier. We've not seen a single specimen without severe or heavy mutation since the Veil opened, and signs seem to be pointing towards the same being the case for all other animal species found in the region."

She sighed, taking her glasses off and pressing her hand to her face; startled, the snake-tailed stoat shuffled backwards, the serpent attached to it rearing its head.
Apologizing softly to the little animal, she made her way down the table to pause before another cage, this one holding a reasonably normal

stoat.

“Here we have a specimen who has been exposed to heavy vitae; we were able to reverse most of the mutation, although not without ill effects. The stoat should be fine with watchful care… however, considering the amount of vitae necessary to revert it to a natural appearance, the implications for the level of ambient mirajin in the atmosphere are troubling, to say the least.”

She paused, waiting patiently for the researcher at her side to finish taking down her words before continuing.

“Gier and Faerwethr are a 'safe' distance away from the Veil's surface, and the effects and rate of mirajin mutation have been staggering. Axl is just within its range, however, and Jetersborough is believed to have fallen well inside the area of most severe impact. We have several researchers and mirologists en route to Axl to survey the area at this point in time, however the Somnambulist Project has no plans of sending personnel to the Jetersborough site for reconnaissance at this time.
"Our head of Mirology, Gigi Urbain, has strongly advised against anyone approaching Jetersborough for the forseeable future. We have been urged not to send a party to Axl as well, but our volunteers have insisted that they understand the risks involved and waivers have been signed.”

Elliot frowned, exchanging a glance with her colleague. “You can go ahead and finish it up from there. Our photographer is out for now, but she'll be in later to take the pictures of the stoats. I'm going to get packed; the longer we wait to run this expedition, the worse it's going to get out there.

"No, don't ask me if I'm sure I want to do this,” she sighed. “I might've had the ability to stop this from happening. If anyone's going out to survey the damage face to face, *I need to be one of those people*.”

Book I Chapter 3: Lotus Seed

Confidential. Classified. Top-Secret.

Labels typically used for documents with dangerous power in the wrong hands-- or, really, even in the right ones. Classifications for military research papers, questionable and immoral plots and information files on enemies of governments.

So why, then, is the Sorilian Government's most jealously-guarded secret file little more than a history book?

Good question; you tell me.

Lucsus: A Historical Account *is a single book; thick, worn, and little more than a handful of generations old. It contains within it a history of our people-- the Chimaera-- our country, and our progressions towards this current age.*

It is the only book in our country that has not only been banned, but ripped from our libraries and private collections and destroyed. This copy, owned by the Government and forbidden from all but our highest officials, is the only known copy that remains.

Finding one and not immediately turning it in to the authorities is considered an act of treason.

We Chimaera have a sordid relationship with our past; we do not discuss it in polite company. We'd rather prefer not to discuss it at all-- all the better to forget it'd ever happened and to deny the situation we are in.
The outside world sees the people of Soril as shrewd merchants and dealers, willing to go to any length to make a sale or protect our wealth. We are materialistic and petty at best, and ruthless and violent at worst.

I will not deny the possibility that those things were part of our original heritage, but we have had no chance to free ourselves from these prejudiced ideals since one incident in particular-- an incident which is only described within that treasonous book.

That event was the Soril-Chimre war.

We don't teach it to our children; the excuse given by most is so that we can someday be freed of the shame it brought us.
The real reason is that, like Lucsus, propagating that information is a crime against the Soril Government worthy of harsh punishment.

That's chimaera harsh*, for the record. Make of that what you will.*

Being the Grand Rajiin, I don't give a flying rotted fig about misguided Governmental laws; my job is to break us out of this pattern of ignorance. So, I will tell you this.

According to Lucsus: A Historical Account*, the Soril-Chimre war began when the Chimaera of Lucsus decided the lure of Chimre's riches, 'guarded' by a population of soft, fat, scientific nancies, was too much to resist any longer.*
We marched to conquer the country and take what it had to offer us. The Chimaera of that age were conquerors, and ignoring such an obvious challenge was no option.

The Grand Rajii led his army over the sea and through the forests of Chimre, stopping on the open hills just before the city of Ros Albion to gaze down at the land that would soon be his.

Gazing back was the army of Chimre; the Dreamwaker's army*, and the Chapter himself stood at the helm.*

Our Rajii shouted; an order for the people of Chimre to surrender at once and be taken on as slaves to do the bidding of the Chimaera people, or die.

The Dreamwaker said nothing.

The Grand Rajii repeated himself once more-- warning that his next cry would lead his army into battle.

But what happened next was unprecedented; a show of raw power, a moment of horror that no Chimaera before or since had ever witnessed.

The Dreamwaker closed his eyes and bowed his head in perfect silence, and the Grand Rajii pulled his sabre from his belt.
Raising it high into the air before his army-- which had begun to whoop and stomp in anticipation of the bloody assault-- he announced

the unconditional surrender of Soril before plunging his sword through his own heart.

When those brave enough to tell the story do so, they say that the Rajii had been driven mad with terror, or possessed by a malicious spirit who drove him to take his own life.

Lucsus: A Historical Account *makes no such guesses.*
We lost that war because our Rajii had been so arrogant as to believe he could stand before the might of a God-- even an incomplete one-- and win.
The Dreamwaker had taken control of him with the slightest of gestures, and through the lips of our leader, stole our peoples' freedom away forever.

From that day on, Soril belonged to Chimre; we had lost our own war with the bloodshed of a single man, and we have paid dearly for it ever since.

The people of Valenth say that the Chimaera can sell you anything you need or desire-- but we are merely the actors, the puppets on stage while the true players conduct the sales and collect the profits.

We play at ruling and running this country-- the supposedly fearsome and cunning beasts behind the black markets and shady dealings.
We are little more than scarecrows distracting the Rose's enemies from the bigger picture.
Meanwhile, they conduct their business and perform their experiments with the luxury and freedom of confidentiality. Luxury we *pay for.*

Their innocence comes at the price of our credibility; their silence is nothing more than whispering while they force us to bellow.

This charade will end with me*, Dreamscar.*
My people shall scapegoat for your ilk no longer!

Soril City, Lucsus

"All of you, get the hell underground *NOW!*
This is no time to play hero!" Sadinha snarled as loudly as she could, her ears pressed back flat to muffle the sound of the royal guards' energy rifles firing into the depths of the cavern city.

An enormous wall of shimmering violet energy had divided the Chimaera capitol into two halves; the unfortunate souls who had been caught inside it seemed to melt away into nothing before their very eyes-- or instantly transformed into eldritch horrors before bursting forth from the field.

It stank of mirajin; the chaotic magic crackled over Sadinha's fur as she watched her city burst into panic and frenzy.
It was all she could do to send the royal guard to fend off the new mutants and lead the remaining people into the deeper caverns and theoretical safety.
The mushroom harvest would be in jeopardy, likely trampled and smashed by people desperate to escape the ominous rift-- but what use would mushrooms be if there was no one left to eat them?

The Grand Rajiin gnashed her teeth, snarling a message into her golden lodica before sending it away for delivery. She had a hunch who was responsible for this, but it couldn't hurt to ask a human friend in Gier for details of what had transpired on the surface.

Sadinha gestured to one of her nearby guards. "There's a stockpile of dreamshards in the warehouse.
Break into it, and start handing them out to the civilians. Tell them to wear the damn things immediately-- anyone who fails to comply and starts to mutate is to be killed at once."

The guard stared at her, her face pale. "Th-the dreamshards? But Rajiin, those are the property of--"

Sadinha narrowed her eyes, her voice soft and threatening. "I know *exactly* who they belong to. I don't care about those worthless hack scientists. *Do as I've told you and protect OUR people. NOW!*"

“Y-yes, Majesty!”

Sadinha watched the guard leave, curling her wings around herself and bowing her head.
She would be severely reprimanded for confiscating the dreamshard shipment-- but she could hardly be brought to care.
She'd been severely reprimanded for having one of the Rose's precious researchers executed as well; they wouldn't dare do anything but scold her unless she had the Dreamwaker himself shot-- and perhaps not even then.
As long as she took her throne and played at ruler, they had what they wanted from her.

The lost shards would come out of their budget, but they'd simply have the Chimaera harvest, cut, and ship more to replace them.

Why should Sorilian work and hardship protect *Chimri* people?

“We're not going to take the blame for you prissy bastards this time,” Sadinha growled, flashing her claws and considering them.

“You've made your bed, and *you can damn well lie in it.*”

Book I Chapter 4: Thorn in the Behind

[missing]

Book I Chapter 5: Porcelain

I've always loved music; I had plans to become a legendary violinist from the moment I first laid eyes on the instrument.
Play with orchestras at night, and spend my days seeing the best the world had to offer-- it was going to be grand, and I was going to be at the heart of it all.

And then life turned around, laughed heartily at me, and turned me into some kind of freak.
(I'm not being derogatory, I promise; I'm just a staunch believer in calling a spade a spade.)

Kids do some stupid things growing up, especially when they grow up as unruly young boys with nothing better to do than go poking around places they don't belong with their best friends. It just happened that we both lived in the horrifying mutagenic shit capital of the world, and the place we didn't belong had the mother of all power-grade miracrystals hidden within it.

I don't know what happened to my best friend-- I haven't seen him since the accident, since our parents decided it was best for everyone involved that our friendship be rendered null and void through harsh and accusatory words and the age-old tradition of moving halfway across the globe.

But I know what happened to me, and most famous violinists aren't... mutants.
They have flesh and blood and and and and and souls and genders. They aren't life-sized, walking porcelain dolls, you know?

I figured my career was over years before it'd ever begun, if not my life.
Naturally, once we'd moved away from Chimre, people were terrified of me. My parents had no idea what sort of horrors they'd exposed me to in trying to get me away from the Gaunthiers; I'd lost a friend and the place I had grown up, and gained only the suspicious glances and derisive jeers of everyone I met.
I'd lost who I was, too, and I didn't have anyone to confide in, besides.

I couldn't trust them *with my feelings. How could I?*

I only played my violin alone then, as far into the woods of Axl I could safely go. The most I could hope to aspire to were odd jobs on the docks, making a pittance for manual labor that cracked my skin more often than it kept food in my mouth.
When work had run scarce or ended for the day, I played for the setting suns and the hidden creatures of the wood.
I was too frightened of trying to sell my talents to a world that was so unfriendly to people like me— people who were rarely

even considered *people anymore.*

And then one night, I got caught.

I'd always figured eventually someone would hear me playing, and I'd have to find a new hiding place. I wasn't interested in what other people might think of my music any longer, as I knew they would never get beyond my appearance before they decided I was a pitiable mockery of an Aeneski.

But when the tiny faerie boy appeared at my side out of thin air, his golden eyes burning like molten stone as he gazed up at me, I threw myself from the old stump I sat upon at once. I was horribly frightened of him and those fiery eyes, but he paid no mind to my own appearance-- he was too busy lovingly cradling a wooden guitar in his arms as he looked expectantly at me.

He'd been listening to my music for many nights, he said, and wanted to play along.

I reprimanded him harshly for approaching me, for thinking I would ever play for another living person-- and for staring at me with those horrible eyes that seemed to look through me.

He laughed and sat down upon his knees, letting his hair fall over his face.

"What-- haven't you ever seen a blind dragon before?" he asked glibly. "Shut up and play."

And in the absence of any better option (and still very much afraid of him), I did.

Firewing Base Camp
Whimsy Forest, South Dreamsong

"Harl, do you mind if me and Cami head out?" Lyric'Ai asked. "I hate to leave you hanging like this in the midst of all this...excitement, but they're not doing too hot. I wanna try and find a place they can relax a bit."

"Oh, nah, Lyri! Go on-- I'll be okay here. Lissen, I'll be through for the next practice, huh?"

"Got it. And hey, don't worry about Giers. He just got a promotion at his *other* job, so he'll probably be too busy thinking about that to fuss too much."

"Thank Bapa for little miracles," Harley grinned, bumping fists with the comparatively tiny *Aeneski*. "Take care, you two. Feel better, Cami!"

Cami gave her a silent nod, and the two elves beat a hasty retreat into the woods. As they walked, Cami glanced worriedly up at the sky, a purple haze eating into the stars from the west.

"Ugh... Lyri, that's coming from Chimre, isn't it?" they gasped, pausing to lean against a tree and close their eyes, pressing their palms against their face.

"Yeah," Lyric replied, chewing his lip.
Sitting down in the leaf litter, he hugged his knees and arched his back, letting his wings burst forth and spread around him. It was a small gesture, but it helped to ease the overwhelming buildup of mirajin energy tormenting him somewhat.

It would have to do for now.

Cami sighed, closing their eyes. "... will your father be alright?"

"Hah, you're sweet, Cam. I'm sure he is-- he's not the suicidal type." He shook his head, his crystalline wings folding neatly against his back.

Cami tilted their head, taking a moment to consider his words; understanding, they decided not to press.

"When we first met, I thought you were just some crazy mutant. Your eyes scared the shit out of me, but that was the strangest thing about you, other than the fact that you wouldn't go away... well, that, and the "hey, I'm a dragon" declaration.

"Still, I was really no better than the people I hated so much-- I wanted to be treated like I had when I was a normal *Aeneski*, but I reacted to you with fear and loathing when you were strange, too."

"Yeah, I'm kind of an odd guy, huh?" He laughed softly. "Tiny vagabond bard *Aeneski* who also happens to be the blind first son of the Dreamwaker and sire of the entire damned Boralion dragonflight. And fierce on guitar, too. You've just got all the luck.

"I wouldn't worry about it, though. You learned your lesson, hey? Don't judge the covers on books and all that. Or... *something*."

"There are so many things I've always wondered about you, Lyr. Most of all... look at who you are, *what* you are. Why run away from home? Why hide that? You've always said you adore your father."

Lyric pursed his lips. "I adore him as a father, yeah. He's... well, you don't fuck with Nefirian Dreamscar's family, *ever*. He was good to me, and he always has been. I knew I was safe from the world growing up with him, and that sort of... affected my method of thinking, in a way.

"I was the worst kind of brat as a kid, you know. Well, not even a brat-- I was a *terror*, and I don't think he ever really knew. I watched my ass at home, but I took and did whatever I wanted when I was off on my own.
"I... did a lot of fucked-up things, Cam, and I started some ripples that are still affecting things in the world even today. Eventually, things built up so much that I knew I had to stop, and I just... took off to try and atone. It's why I'm a pacifist now, and why I choose to live my lives

around mortals, to learn more about them and appreciate the fact that the people with the least power in the world are still people with lives and families and friends and dreams.
"It's why I write music, as well-- something to try and ease the pain, and to remember the people I hurt back then in my childish games."

Cami frowned. "What could you have done that was so horrible, Lyri? ...don't answer that unless you really want to," they added.

"We all have our demons, I guess. I still can't think of you as anything other than incredibly kind. Well, and completely vain, but kind, too."

Lyric'Ai fell silent for a moment, staring at the earth. "...Have you ever heard of a place called Grenadienne?" he began.

Lyric.
Nefirian's voice bubbled up from the depths of Lyric's mind; he froze, perking his ears.

The ritual was sabotaged. I'm going back to the Reverie to save Opus.

"Lyri?"
His heart began to race; he barely took notice of Cami's concern, lifting a finger to ask them to wait.

...*Sabotaged? Save her?* he replied, his telepathic message laced with dread.

Save her from who?!

Book I Chapter VI: The Ethereal Forest

I've fallen so far.

We Flarions were a proud and noble flight, once-- we had earned the right to be proud and noble, once.
I can't say how much of that I was personally responsible for, but the wilds and the people of the world were safely under our care. We were a symbol of protection and life, not hatred and fear.

And then the next thing I knew, I no longer had control.

My father and I liberated a country, but my children paved the road to that victory in their own blood. Some gave their souls as well.

To demand freedom for a people and be quoted such a terrible price!

I grieved for them, but on that day I also lost some essential part of myself. Wounded by their loss as well as by the things I had learned of Necromancy and its wielders, I grew paranoid, harsh, and violent.
My Father could have never known how such lessons would affect me. How could he? He was searching for himself, too.

But as my downward spiral grew more extreme, I lost all sight of my virtues and became ever more desperate and frantic.
I made bad decision after bad decision-- and many of my own kin followed suit, too faithful and loyal to question me.

I lost my capacity for joy. I lost my sense of hope. I lost my honor, my children, my faith, my restraint...

And then, in a final desperate bid to piece everything together again, I lost my mind, and burned away everything I had left.

These hands are soaked in the blood of the people I loved-- people I had sworn to protect and serve. I led my children away from the path of righteousness and balance and into a cruel and fanatical way of life.

What sort of Heir am I?
What hope is there for Valenth if its stewards are too lost in themselves to tend it?

Kelan-- Father*-- I don't dare hope for your forgiveness.*
How could I ever demand it from you, after everything I've done?

But I do hope you come to understand your place in the world sooner and more gracefully than I have, and I hope you use that knowledge as well as you can.

I hope that my life, flawed and regretful as it was, helped you learn something that gives you the strength you need to serve our world like you were destined to.

Because I think... Because I think I figured things out too late.

I always loved you, and I always will.

And I'm sorry.

Cool wind flowed over Valdren's scales like liquid; he stirred, shifting onto his side to fold a wing over himself.
With a slow and shuddering breath, he filled his lungs and sighed, one eye cracking open to find an intense azure sky gazing back at him, framed with leaves in a million shining hues.

He smiled appreciatively, stretching with a great and bellowing yawn before climbing to his feet.
Lush forest surrounded him on all sides, thick and full and teeming with life; nearby, a little stream gurgled and bubbled, fresh water pouring into a tiny pond leaping with silver fish.

A sudden thought raced to the forefront of his mind just as a little flock of birds burst from the canopy, circling over his head.
He lifted his claws to gaze at them in confusion, then rushed to see his reflection in the glassy water.

"How... how is this possible? What is this place?" he asked the mirror image, and it looked back at him in hopeless confusion.

The sunlight felt good and warm on his scales-- but there were *too many suns in the sky*, weren't there? Valenth had... two. Two? Yes, two.

And why could he see the moon? And what had taken an enormous bite from it, leaving only a crescent behind? Why was it silver?

How had he been cured of his fatal mutation? And for that matter, where was he?

Who was he?--

Shhh, came a gentle voice from the back of his mind.

You are Valdren Flarion, son of Kelan-- and this is the Reverie. Your mind was fading away, so I gathered its flicker *and brought it here.*

"Valdren." He tested the name on his tongue; it felt right-- familiar somehow. "..Th-th... but how is that possible? Wasn't I... And *who are you?!* Why are you in my--"

Hush, Valdren, the Dreamwaker said. *You have a million questions; I will answer every one for you as soon as I've returned.*
But your mother is in danger-- I can't sustain this connection, he explained.

"In danger?" Valdren spread his wings-- pausing a moment to admire the way they glittered in the light. "Where are you going?! Take me with you! *Please!* Perhaps I can help you!"

I must go now, and alone, the Chapter's voice insisted, echoing within Valdren's mind.

There is not another entity on Valenth fit to challenge an Elysian God-- and Chira WILL *return Opus to me!*

Book I Chapter 7: High

When I first met Gabriel Gaunthier, I thought he was a cheeky little shit.

I've never seen more ridiculous, dangerous, down-right idiotic circumstances surround one little man in my entire life-- and every time, he'd come out of it better off than when he started.
Rumors about him and the kind of luck he drew circulated Axl Branch more thoroughly than air or mirajin radiation; everybody knew about him well before initiation.

And then, just my luck, I *ended up his partner.*

I admit, I was so furious about it that I went out of my way to give him hell. I knew my parents would never let the SRO kick me out, and I figured if I gave him a hard enough time of things they'd pull him and give me someone with a brain in his stead.

Yeah, I was really damn selfish; I've got no excuses and I won't sugarcoat it. You have every right to look down on me for the way I treated that poor kid.

And he had every right to leave me for dead when I got bitten by a werewolf in the forests around Axl-- so having him bust his ass to try and find a cure for me when he knew *he was risking his life just being around me was a hell of a shock.*

He failed, and I tore his lab apart once I changed for the first time.
I got carted off by Sagarthay Anom, a so-called "Occult Specialist" and the biggest asshole in the Organization, for study.

Once I was safe and secure in Chimre, he treated me the way I had treated Gabe – like an animal.
That I was a person with feelings didn't cross his mind in the slightest; I was there to be observed, experimented on, and sent out for walkies for good behavior.

I could've run, yeah. I tried a few times-- but you can't get very far, out there. The few cities and protected settlements are the only things protecting the people from the Wilds, and I didn't want to kill myself.

Anom knew as much; he knew I could only run so far, and wherever I ended up he could get me back when he was ready for me.
Bastard.

But I ran when I could, doing my best to convince myself that I was running towards freedom rather than doing laps in a fenced-off yard.

Like a dog.

I found other dogs during my runs, luckily; one of them just happened to be the Dreamwaker's very own pet, Na'than Silvermane.
He was just getting ready to ship out to Aensdoun, but he said he'd put a good word in for me when he got back.

He also mentioned knowing that I was 'friends' with Gabriel, and that he'd be going on the expedition as well.

I hugged him and cried, and begged him to keep an eye on him for me.
I told him what had happened-- of course, he'd already known-- and he promised he'd make sure we had a chance to see each other again.

Na'th has never broken a promise to me; not only did he get Gabe and I a chance to make up, face-to-face, but he managed to tell his 'master' what was going down in the secure labs with Anom, and won me my freedom.

The three of us are tight; this crazy fucking world has tried to come between us and failed over and over again.
I think I probably know more about Gabe right now than he does himself, thanks to Na'th sharing his files with me.

There's... there's some heavy shit in there. I can't really pretend to have any idea what half of it means; I'm a cosmetic engineer, so I'm only familiar with superficial biology and low-grade mirajin manipulation, not psionics and the study of the mind.

But... listen.

Gabe's like a brother to me. If anything bad happens to him, I will kick some teeth in for real, I don't care who *it is.*

But the Dreamwaker is like a father to Na'th, too, and he's an engineering genius to boot.
I trust his judgement, and I do my best to give the Lord-Doctor the benefit of the doubt. It's none of my business how he runs his Organization, as long as he's keeping creeps like Anom in line.

I'm just here to rearrange faces, not make moral judgements on immortal beings who get the big picture better than us mortals.

I don't know, though... The things that were in those files...
It's all out of my league. It's all way, way out of my league, and the sort of thing that, I don't know. If it's real...

What the hell scares a fucking Chapter? Gabe? *Why would anyone...?*
I just don't know. Na'th warned me, but... it's still hard to believe.

It's like he said, though. Gabe probably could really use a friend right now.

Borealis, The Reverie

For an enormous lizardbeast, Gerhardt could move.

His legs made short work of the terrain; they sped with ease over prairie and marsh, through mountain and forest, and over the shifting desert sands towards their destination.
The scenery flickered and shifted around them seemingly at random; it made Eva's head hurt to try and admire the dreamscapes as they danced past.

Finally at a loss, she pressed herself firmly against the pseudoleupak's back and closed her eyes.

"How much longer will this take?" She shouted over the whipping winds, grateful she couldn't see Anderson's stupid, cocky face.

The monster slowed to a stop, gurgling with what Eva assumed was delight. She cringed.

"Open your eyes; we're here."

Eva did.

They sat just beside the largest hole she had ever seen in her life – a crater of mammoth proportions leading deep into the heart of the earth. Massive towers of miracrystal grew from the sides like teeth, illuminating multiple spiraling paths down into an alien forest far below.

Squinting, she could make out a myriad of colorful shapes wandering about amongst the foliage, vines, crystals, and rocks.
They were oblivious to her-- barely more than grains of sand from this height, the thought of anyone down there noticing them was laughable.

"...what is this place?" She breathed, astonished.
She didn't want to climb down from the pseudoleupak's back; perhaps if she clung to him, she wouldn't fall in.

"That? That's Borealis, the leupak capital of the Reverie. But that's not where we're going," Andy said, scratcing his cheek absently.
"*That is*." He pointed upwards, and Eva's eyes followed his hand.

The clouds had gathered above the great hole, forming a white and swirling spiral in the sky. It ascended for what must've been thousands of feet, seeming to frame a colorful moon drifting overhead.
Flocks of iridescent white birds fluttered from the cloud platforms, floating gracefully into the distance.

"That's Solar-- where the iicarn hold vigil over the city below, and go about their daily business. Your friend is likely getting his training here, as we speak."

“That's fantastic,” Eva muttered, “but how do we get *up*?”

Andy sighed. “You post-humans and your lack of imagination, I swear.”

The muscles on his back twitched, spasmed, and bloomed, transforming into a pair of large white wings. He flexed and stretched them slowly for a moment-- then scooped Eva unceremoniously into his arms.

“Ugh, *gods*! You could've asked first!”

“Just hush and hang on. You wanted me to take you, so I'm taking you. I aught to leave you, too, frankly…”

They rose into the glowing sky, wind whipping their hair around their faces and shoulders as they went. Eva clung resentfully to Anderson, muttering curses he innocently ignored.

The spiral-clouds swept past them as they ascended, small groups of iicarn treading gracefully across them to socialize, plan, and watch over the world below.

Glancing down, Eva realized how high up they were and gasped, holding her breath and clamping her eyes shut.

Dream-world or not, she didn't much care to even imagine what it might be like to fall…

“Woah, he-hey, Deed! Look at you with your snazzy wings. Who's your friend?” asked a voice Eva immediately wanted to punch.

Andy settled on a cloud platform, gently setting Eva down and folding his wings away. “Incidentally, someone who wants to see you. Where's Eight gotten to, Giers?”

Giovan scowled. “I hate you. Ugh, he just took off a little while ago. He must've left about fifteen craters in the ground trying to fly-- then when I told him about the Veil, he just threw himself off the edge and split like it was nothing.”

Eva slugged him.

She wasn't certain what was more satisfying; the solid *crack* her fist made when it connected with his face, or the way his glasses sailed over the edge and out of sight.

“*Fuck*, lady! What the hell's your problem?!” Gio spat, eyeing the blood on his hands after he pulled them away from his face.

Anderson burst into hysterical laughter. “Wow, she's got an arm on her.”

“Fuck you too, Thorne.”

“Hey! I'll punch you too, don't think I won't!” The leupak's cool demeanor fell through the clouds after Giovan's glasses.

“Damnit. Listen, your boyfriend isn't coming back here for a while. He's got his orders, and he'll be traveling Valenth to complete them,” Gio grumbled, pressing a palm to his bleeding nose.

“I don't know what the hell this goober was thinking bringing you here, but unless you're looking to join the Dreamwaker's elite-- and frankly, *I* won't be putting in any good word for you-- you need to leave.”

“She's Na'than's girl, actually,” Andy mumbled under his breath.

“...are you shitting me? Ugh, *whatever*! Just don't freaking put your hands on me again, or you're going down to get my glasses for me, got it? I don't care who the hell you are, that shit's not on.”

“I've owed you for a long time, Dr. Giers.
Believe me, you should be grateful that's all I've given you for what you've done to Gabriel. Anom wasn't so lucky.”

Giovan and Anderson exchanged glances.

“Wait, *what*? Hang on, you're the... listen, maybe we should get to know each other a little better, start off on a clean slate, y'know?”

“No, thanks.”

“What *did* you do to him, Giers? I know he pisses you off, but...” Andy paused, scratched his cheek, and laughed. “It's the beacon thing, isn't it? Just being around him freaks you out...”

Giovan scowled. “...Fuck, I never even thought about that before. Well, this is just freaking great.”

“Why would that have anything to do with you?” Eva rose a brow, folding her arms across her chest. “You're human, aren't you?”

Gio gestured towards Andy with his head. “Hah, nope. I'm as human as *him*, now.”

“Of course. So what, is the SRO some sort of conspiracy aiming to turn as many people as possible into secret monsters or something?”

Anderson and Giovan stared at her.

“...you know what, forget I even asked.”

Book I Chapter VIII: Forced Flight

So tell me, do you understand what it means to be human?

Mortal life, really, it's not all that bad. No shooting lasers out of your eyes or wrangling dragons or taking werewolves out for a walk around the neighborhood while enormous six-legged lizards pull carriages down the street and automatonic cameras watch your every move, yeah, but... there are perks.

Perks like, you know, living a normal life.

Eating breakfast in the morning, putting your pants on one leg at a time. Opening the front door to get the mail without ripping it off its hinges for the third time this month. Looking out your window without stepping in a random pile of mutagenic sludge.

Knowing your own thoughts from everybody else's. And, oh yeah, not having anybody else's thoughts in your brain in the first place. That's a good one, too.

I haven't lived all that long, no. I never really... had a chance to get to know myself, you know?
I was just doing what my parents told me was best-- trying to find my place in the world, make a living, that sort of boring nonsense everybody supposedly does.

I couldn't even do that right. Hell, I couldn't do anything *right, if the crap that went on seemingly every time I drew a breath was any indication.*
I thought it was all pretty rotten, life. Bad luck is one thing-- but after a while you come out convinced that you've got some sort of crazy hex on you because of something your great great grandmother did or something.

You start to reach for anything you can that might explain your plight-- maybe even solve *it, if you could ever dare to hope for such a thing...*

Maybe I looked for answers too hard. Maybe I asked too many questions, or shouted into the darkness a little too loudly.

It's not like I ever expected the things behind the veil to hear me... or worse, answer.

I didn't know how good I had it, back in the days when I thought I was just some unlucky idiot. Things just... happened, and I took it in stride and got on with it.

Now I understand, though.
Being human is about taking everything the world throws at you with the acceptance that there isn't a whole hell of a lot you or anyone else can do about it, and just carrying on despite that.
That's life-- but at the same time you get the pain and fear and uncertainty and all that, you get love and warmth and understanding and tolerance and a lot of other good stuff, too.

The world just sort of goes on around you, oblivious-- but it pretty much lets you alone, too.
You're invisible... but you're free.

Go figure that this is all so damned obvious now that I'm looking in from the outside.

And I'm sure that now, I can never go back.

Chimre Airspace, The Reverie

The wind battered Gabriel's face and hair as he flew, clouds drifting by him as his wings beat in a steady and solid rhythm.
Any other day, he might have savored the feeling of breaking free from the restraints of gravity, achieving man's great dream of unhindered flight.

But he knew his wings were not his own-- and neither was his mind, not anymore. The soft and cavernous echoes within it reminded him of as much, even as he was faintly relieved to hear that he was alone with his thoughts for now.

A bubble of rage floated gently up to the surface of his mind, and he screamed at the top of his lungs. The sound was swallowed up by the whipping winds, likely silenced long before it ever reached the ears of another creature.

What was *happening?*

He'd made the mistake of deciding the Organization was his best chance at pursuing a career in biology, only to be whisked down a mad and spiraling path leading into greater heights of insanity and the loss of his humanity. He'd made friends along the way, of course, but most of them had suffered the very same as well (some in front of his very eyes, poor Eva).
It had seemed like a curse at first, as though everyone who had joined or even associated with the group was doomed to become something unlike their former selves.

Then fate had dumped him unceremoniously into the lap of the Dreamwaker, and when Gabriel first gazed into the Chapter's three eyes and felt him inside his mind, he understood *everything*.

To belong to the Organization was to be a limb-- one of many infinite tentacles irrevocably connected to and controlled by the Dreamwaker. Far more than simply recruits seeking knowledge and science, its members were *vessels*, edging ever-closer to the realization of some mad, grand design, whether with their knowledge or not.

And beyond the Dreamwaker's three eyes, hidden somewhere within himself, there was *something else*, something greater.

The *Aeneski* was as much a person as one of Na'than's automatons-- just a mere *shell*-- and the fuel that drove the thing was something unfathomable, beyond comprehension or sane imagination.
After his transformation, Gabriel had felt its presence wriggling just at the edges of his consciousness; it was the same thing that spoke to him, listening to his thoughts, sometimes guiding or even snuffing them outright.

It was the same thing that had kept him from giving any of this any real thought until now. It had kept him from protesting, as well, until the syringe was in his arm, the scalpel at the throat of his former self.

Gabriel thought as loudly as he could, challenging the murky presence to stifle him, to force his anger and frustration back down his throat.

But nothing happened.

The iicarn dropped from the sky, landing on his hands and knees within a small clearing. He carefully folded his wings against his back and sat down, glancing quietly at the luminous crystal-forest around him.
During their conversation in Solar, Giovan-- who had been uncharacteristically amicable-- explained that the Dreamwaker had left for Valenth to complete a project he had been preparing for for quite some time. The cheeky scientist had been loath to share the details at first, but eventually relented.

As soon as Gio mentioned the 'project' being a ritual intended to merge Valenth and the Reverie, Gabriel hurled himself from the cloudy outpost, intent on running back to the waking world if he had to.

Naturally, his wings decided this would be the perfect time to cooperate, just after he'd given up on the stupid things.
Of course, he had no idea how to reach his destination, which in the Reverie was as effective as walking in circles. If the ritual had been successful, he was as good as lost until he learned how to travel the world of dreams...

...or was it simply *the world, now?*

He shook his head and sighed, closing his eyes and concentrating as best he could. What had Limbo looked like when he crossed it within the Dreamwaker's unicorn-drawn carriage? The images slipped away from him; every grove of mirajin-changed trees looked like any other, to him.
Worse, he was certain he was simply imagining the one he was currently sitting within...

Anxious, frustrated, and angry, Gabriel clenched his teeth and hissed, flattening his ears back against his head. Did the entire universe exist

solely to mock him? It certainly seemed that way.

The universe responded with an angry rumble of its own.

Gabe snapped his eyes open, shuffling away in shock just as the earth began to crack and buckle around him, rising up in great mounds of grass, roots, dirt, and stone.
A double pair of shining crystal eyes appeared, followed by another; rocky beasts crawled forth from the soil, gathering in a loose circle around the startled iicarn and gazing expectantly at him. The gargoyles were smooth with faceted skins, the grass, flowers and loose soil clinging to their heads and backs even as they rose to their full height on stumpy hind legs.

One of the larger gargoyles rumbled at him, reaching out with a clawed hand to gently touch him.

Gabriel had forgotten to keep his emotions in check; whatever the Dreamwaker's *true* reasoning behind stifling his feelings, it was still a liability to let them run wild.

He sighed, gently pressing his hand against the gargoyle's claw as the others watched. At least they weren't aggressive.

"Sorry-- I guess I woke you guys up, huh? I really need to understand all this better, so I can avoid using it unless I mean to."

The gargoyle stared blankly, wordlessly at him.

He'd known better; gargoyles were not known for their intelligence. Still, a conversation with something *outside* of his head would've been nice.

Returning to his seat, he relaxed, watching the rocky elementals mull about around him.

"I wonder what happens now. If Valenth has become part of the dream, do I still need to go on this stupid fetch quest? Can't I just imagine up a pile of vials full of blood and be done with it? I wish someone'd told me all the rules, or at least shown me what it even means to live in the Reverie."

He wondered if Gio might've known anything. Would he have been inclined to share? Perhaps simply being less anxious around him would've made it easier for the possessed scientist to endure his presence in kind.

If strong emotion was enough to cause a psionic flare-up...

"I suppose I'm on my own. I'll stay here for now and sort things out, and then perhaps I'll find my way back into Valenth and check up on everybody..."

Gabriel's words died upon his lips. Check up on everybody... *like this*?

He was an iicarn now; he couldn't waltz around in public as though he were still human.
Even if he resented Nefirian for having transformed him without so much as permission or fair warning, he'd still be soundly punished for such a brazen display and blatant disregard of Organization protocol.

Even if he'd wanted to, he'd never been assigned his mask. What if his family found out what'd happened to him?

What might Eva think?

Before he could berate himself for his last thought, a sharp and burning pain cut through Gabriel's mind; he was on his knees and screaming before he'd had time to register moving.
The gargoyles bellowed, stomping and tearing at the ground in shared distress as the iicarn clutched his head, tears trickling down his cheeks as he groaned.

As the pain began to throb, soften, and slowly fade away, he dimly realized that the thing lurking in the dark expanses of his mind was crying out in horror and despair.

Its psychic anguish had wracked his very being, and it continued to howl.

Book I Chapter 9: Veilecho

In the aftermath of the opening of the Veil, the wilds are changing.

The flow of vitae has shifted, and the elements of nature have bent and swayed to match, in ways both subtle and striking.
Nothing in the lands around the Veil has been left untouched by mirajin's chaotic influence.
Obscured by the shadows of tainted and shifting foliage, even former pets roam the countryside in new shapes-- watching for prey with too many eyes, full of more intelligence than they aught to possess.

A larger victim of the rampant mutation rustles a nearby branch, and the feline vanishes in a flash, memories of a simpler life spinning in its all-too-active mind.

Book I Chapter X: Break Down

Never trust a self-proclaimed god; that was a lesson I was supposed to have learned thousands of years ago, but apparently I forgot it somewhere along the way.

Why did I choose to ignore that self-given advice now? Perhaps because I believed an alleged Elysian deity could help her-- bring her back to where she was years ago, when we spoke and laughed and roamed the world together.

I thought it was the best thing to do. Perhaps the "right" thing, whatever that means.
I had found something that knew about her and what she was, and letting her experience her own kind might've been what she needed to find her way back into lucidity for a while.

Age does not cure naivete; that's what experience is for, if you're lucky.

Well, she saved me from this lot a few years back.

I suppose it's time to return the favor.

The Edge of Consciousness, The Reverie

It began as the faintest ripple through the fabrics of dreamspace-- whispers of stone displacing deep within the earth, too distant for mortal ears to hear.

Chira heard and felt the disturbance long before it swelled into the full force of a mighty earthquake, vibrating violently beneath her.

Dipping her graceful head, she smiled, brushing a talon lightly down the back of the black dragon curled against her breast.
Opus murmured faintly, leaning reflexively into the goddess's touch as she slept, unroused by the rumbling quake.

As the great dragon watched and waited, the rocky earth at their feet cracked and buckled, stone shearing away as a rotund and scaly creature wriggled from the fault, crawling out at Chira's feet and rising to face her.

The little white lizard bellowed, three eyes gleaming as it shook its blood-red hair away from its blunt face. The earthquake rumbled, crackled, and died away in his wake, its source removed.

"Such a show," Chira drawled, unimpressed. "I take it you've come to gloat over your flawless victory?"

She curled an arm pointedly around the sleeping black dragon, tilting her head queryingly at Nefirian.

"You know why I'm here," he hissed between clenched teeth. "You knew I was destined to fail, and you encouraged me... *ensured* that I would try anyway!"

The goddess eyed him with an expression of indifference.

"There are more important things in the world than your ego, faerie. The vital surplus that had been caused by the Eye of Elysia millenia ago has now been accounted for thanks to your heroic feat. You should be *proud*..."

"I don't give a damn about your Eye of Elysia!" he spat. "None of that would have mattered anymore, and you know it!
You've sabotaged this for, what, "balance"? You'd rather have people suffer and struggle and die for the sake of some arbitrary and outdated concept of global duality?!"

“You're a juvenile, idealistic fool,” Chira said icily. “Your brilliant plan was doomed from the very start; it's only by blind luck and our interference that you accomplished anything of note. To blame me-- *me!*-- for your mortal shortcomings is to deny the ultimate will of the planet itself.”

Nefirian growled.

“I'm done with you. I'm taking Opus and leaving, and you can tend your precious balance with your own hands-- once you've aquired a functional pair, of course.”

Opus squirmed and choked, struggling weakly as Chira's talon closed tightly around her throat.

“*Oh?* It would appear we've had a communications breakdown,” the Elysian goddess purred, watching with cruel satisfaction as Nefirian froze on the spot.

“What the hell are you-- *let her GO*!

Opus gagged, reaching up to pull at Chira's claw; her eyelids fluttered, remaining closed even as she struggled.

Nef launched himself at the goddess with a scream of rage--

-- only to collide with Artemio's fist.

He bounced backwards, rolling across the cracked and rocky earth before rising to all fours, blood trickling from his lip as the demonic bat drifted in the air between him and the goddess, leering.

“This dragon is the last existing member of the Elysian race. Or rather, she would have been,” Chira scowled, loosening her grip to gently stroke Opus's throat with a claw. “Exposing her egg to your crystal permanently damaged her body and mind long before she had ever hatched; prolonging that exposure led to the condition she was in when I first met her. Slow, steady deterioration... her prognosis was dire from the moment she was born.

“Tell me, Nefirian-- did you see her as alive? Because it is plain that she never was-- and yet, you let her suffer throughout her life, struggling to find a way to communicate and simply live before reality became too great a burden for her to bear, and she fell too ill to even sustain consciousness.

"As a supposed expert in medicine, you should have known the severity of her condition. You should have known that a life confined to dreams as one's body fell into further disrepair was no life!

“And yet... it is apparent that you were too weak, possessive, and *mortal* to do what needed to be done,” the dragon goddess spat. “The Elysians died out when Opus was born. The last egg of a lost race, placed in stasis to await a more opportune hatching time... only to into the hands of a mortal imbecile, a failed alchemist, to be mutated beyond potency! Today, I will put the ancient people to their final rest at last, and Valenth can continue on without them as it was meant to.”

Chira's grip tightened around the black dragon's throat once more; with a neat twist and a sick, wet *crack*, Opus's body twitched, then fell limp upon the cold stone ground.

The Dreamwaker hurled himself forward a second time, fury blazing in his eyes as Artemio dropped to meet him. The two beasts collided, rolling in a flurry of wings and claws as they struggled to right themselves.

“Beat him until he knows his place. Once he's become subservient, the other two will follow,” Chira hissed, rising to her feet.

“Hardly,” Artemio laughed, slashing his wingclaws brutally across the leupak's face.

Nefirian hurled him bodily against the ground in retaliation, leaping forward with open jaws. His teeth closed on open air; Artemio materialized behind him, slamming both feet nimbly into Nef's back.

Tumbling away, the bruised leupak rolled onto his feet and began to circle, teeth trembling and eyes wild with rage and shock as his mind buzzed and chattered like a nest of wasps. Fragments of shattered stone and crystal bounced and vibrated around his feet, resonating with psychic energy.

“Poor little lizard. You sure do pick the wrong crowds to hang out with, don't you?” Artemio said glibly, unfussed by the gashes over his chest and arms that oozed blackish blood onto the stones below.

An invisible force slammed the bat facefirst into the ground. Despite himself, Artemio laughed, rising onto his wings and feet again with a mad grin; he spat out a tooth, lurching from side to side.

“Ooh... Somebody's *aaangry*!”

The leupak lunged again.

Artemio leapt over him, whirling gracefully before unleashing a blast of sickly green light.
Nef screamed as the morte ate into his thick, rubbery scales, flowing through his blood like acid.
He dropped onto his knees to claw at his face and chest, tail slamming involuntarily against the rock again and again as thin streams of dark blood flecked with vibrant magenta and sickly green dripped from his scaly lips.

Artemio casually strode forward, his eyes bright as he watched with a cool smile on his face.

“Hey, Dreamscar... Want to know a secret, darling? A little consolation prize for giving it your all...”

Nefirian groaned and trembled, retching with a tortured sob as necromantic toxins coursed through his body.

The bat stopped a few steps in front of him, his smile breaking into a distorted and toothy grin.

“There are *four* Chapters, not three. *F-O-U-R*. Chew on that for a while, huh? I'll give you a kiss if you figure it out. See you when you wake up...!”

With a strangled croak, Nefirian lifted his head to watch as a new spell crackled over Artemio's wing.
The Dreamwaker's pearly white scales faded to a wet, translucent pink, his bulk collapsing and merging into formless jelly.

In an instant, the leupak seemed to dissolve, melting into a puddle of bubbling, miraplasmic goo.

Artemio frowned, lowering his wing; the crackling morte fizzled and faded away as he canceled his spell.

“...hang on, what? You slippery little...”

The viscous pink ichor flowed and churned over the ground, dripping away between the cracks.

“Hmf. So, does *that* count as subservience?” Artemio mused aloud, oblivious to Chira's expression of displeasure.

Book I Chapter 11: What Matters Most

Psyche, The Reverie

Her prognosis was dire from the moment she was born.

"I've... I've..."

Black, tarlike ichor sloughed off onto the floor in thick chunks, bubbling and sizzling as it evaporated away.

Nefirian leaned heavily against a crystal twice his girth, his muscles and bones still aching long after the last traces of morte had been purged from him.
His eyes were bloodshot and slick with excess moisture; his ears and fingers twitched and spasmed with pain he could barely grasp anymore.

You should have known the severity of her condition.

"...I... I should have," he murmured, staring without focus into the clusters of jagged pink crystal forming throughout the little chamber.

I should have been more careful.
I should have thought about what might happen... I should have left the egg where I found it.

I should have been more careful I should have been more thoughtful I should have been smarter should have known should have...

"Was she happy?" he asked aloud. "Would she have chosen a different life? Did she resent what I... what I... Did she resent me?"

Tell me, Nefirian-- Did you see her as alive?
Did you...

"She w-was alive," he protested. "She was alive, she was h-happy... she was the only one left, and I did everything I could for her. We... we all did.
"I... I even tried to fix it so she didn't h-have to be alone anymore, if we couldn't teach her everything about what she was ourselves..."

It had been an enormous undertaking-- the first experiment he had conducted since the leupaks first appeared.
There had been countless failures-- Elysian DNA was more volatile than anything he had ever seen-- but in the end...
Each of the Chapters had elected to donate some of their own blood to the project. Only three of the countless eggs created had been viable... but it had been enough, and the Heirs were born.

She had been happy.

But she was still sick, and the hatchling he had personally helped create was born blind.
He dedicated all of his time to caring for both of them, sometimes taking the other two whelps as well when Kelan and Bastion couldn't.

Somehow, they had become a family, despite everything. But had he done the right thing? Was she sick because of him?
If he had...

Exposing her egg to your crystal permanently damaged her body and mind long before she had ever hatched.
You let her suffer throughout her life.
You were too weak, possessive, and mortal to do what needed to be done.

"...she was a person," he sighed softly, curling closer to the crystal."I couldn't just..."

Even if he was to blame?

She had been alive... until he gave her to Chira.
If he had thought, if he had acted with care instead of in rage, he could have caught her soul before it slipped away, instead of Nigel--

"This is my fault. No matter h-how I examine it, *I am to blame...*"

"...whatever happened, you're not alone."

Nefirian hurled himself across the chamber, spinning on all fours to face the blonde-haired stranger who had suddenly appeared nearby.

"What-- *who the hell are you!? How did you--*"
His body trembled with panic as much as rage-- but in the soft magenta glow of the miracrystals, something in the man's face seemed...

"I am Lord Remy," he said gently, his green eye apologetic."I didn't intend to startle you, but I couldn't ignore the painful tug in the back of my mind, so I came to see why."

Nef stared at him, shaking. "*B-b-bast?!* What's happened to you? Don't you-- no, no, please, don't... *please don't...*"

Before he could protest or pull away or demand answers, he found himself in the newcomer's arms, drowning in the scents of incense and bearskin.
"Who... why? I don't... you're," he sobbed, unable to fight the sudden rush of emotion that overtook him.

"Nefirian... it's a very long story, and I'm not sure if now is the best time. I did you a great disservice by not immediately making myself known to you when... it happened, and I'm sorry for that. But--"

Defeated and resigned, the Dreamwaker slumped helplessly against Remy, closing his eyes.
"No!You look like him... you... you *almost* feel like him.
"But he's gone... but this is still his body," he whispered almost inaudibly."Opus... Opus is d... d... gone. Opus is gone, and... and my husband is also gone. Why? *Why?*" His voice broke.
"I... this... is this my punishment? Is hurting the people I love the only way for me to repent?"

Remy gently lifted his chin."Nefirian, this isn't punishment.The world... *our* world, is far harsher and more unforgiving than we'd ever imagined, and we as Chapters have the responsibility and curse of experiencing the worst of it.We have to provide an example for the people struggling to survive... we have to lead them, and guide them, and *protect them* at all costs."

"You awoke," he said simply, softly.

"Bastion awoke," Remy replied. "He awoke and he took his life, and I was born in his stead."

Nefirian stared at him in agonized silence; Remy drew a slow, deep breath and sat down, gently taking Nef's hands in his own.
"When Bastion left to help Sasha, he arrived in Aensdoun to find him upon his deathbed. He had been cursed-- hit with some infernal

necromantic spell of Artemio's that slowly devoured his vitae. Bastion went to console him just as the bear died; the spell reanimated him, and Sasha managed to break his neck before Dilndrou put him to a proper rest."

"B-but, I thought you said he..."

Remy pressed a finger to his lips. "He recovered from his injuries... *mostly*. The shock of Sasha's death, rebirth, and attack on him jarred him into manifesting his full status as a Chapter. He spontaneously regenerated, healing his neck as well as the wounds he sustained upon his face from the claw swipe.

"Except the curse Sasha was hit with was powerful enough to affect anything he harmed as well," he explained, flipping his eyepatch up to reveal his missing eye.

"As Chapter of Matter, this body regenerates immediately after suffering any sort of injury or trauma. But when Sasha's claw tore out the left eye, the affected areas were affected by the curse as well.
I assume that if not for the regeneration granted thanks to his ascension, he would have died and been risen as a zombie, like Sasha. Instead, the affected parts simply regenerated and immediately became necrotic.

"Kelan and Dilndrou took him into the Firestarters' camp in Aensdoun to tend to his wounds and nurse him back to health-- but he was too badly affected by the things he had seen and experienced, and snuck away into the woods.

"He... killed himself, effectively, multiple times, but it didn't stick until the last attempt," he said softly.

"The resulting trauma was sufficient enough to require a complete regeneration of the brain, which did not leave his personality intact. I'm... I'm sorry, Doctor."

Nefirian looked away. "...why... why come to me now, though? You needn't... If Bastion is truly... *gone*, then..."

"I never intended to leave you in the dark," Remy confessed. "After I understood what had happened, I needed some time to come to terms with everything, learn... what it all meant. The Erosions came to save me from myself once they felt Bastion's anguish, and I needed to help them start new lives, as well. Between all that... I had intended to come find you, and tell you what had happened.

"I knew it was direly important-- that I had to tell you about Bastion, and the Eye of Elysia, and Sasha and Artemio... all the things Bastion had never understood, or had been too afraid to tell you, or had learned days before his death... But I let time get away from me.

"And then, today, I felt you crying out, much as I had done months ago when the dragons had come to find me. I consider myself a Chapter dedicated to the care of others, regardless of origin or allegiance or circumstance. How could I ignore your pain? This was once the body of someone very dear to you, as well... I owed you that closure, at the very least."

"...so you're the one who created the Disciples," Nefirian murmured.

"Let's face it," Remy sighed. "The people of Valenth need somewhere they can go to escape, to find shelter and compassion and safety for a little while in the midst of all... *this*.

"I don't deal in what's going on in the outside world. I don't understand it.
But... maybe, I can help heal a few wounded hearts, and lead a few wayward souls back to sanctuary.
You guys can handle the field work, the fighting and experimenting and living and dreaming. That's your job, that's your *thing*.

"Maybe I can make certain that when someone is lost and alone and broken, somebody hears."

Book I Chapter XII: Dinosaur Hunter

The Infinite Green, Aensdoun

Liam clung to Alice's neck as he rode, his bags hanging from the makeshift saddle he'd fashioned from rope and skins, heavy with eggs.
Alice screamed with delight as she sped over the grassy plain, ensuring any would-be attackers from miles around would stay well away.
The zemoira were the kings of Aensdoun—fully-grown, few creatures would dare to challenge one.

Dragons being one of the only exceptions... and where there were dragons, nests likely weren't far.

"Yah! We've got a quota to make, Alice-- there's gotta be something hiding around here..."

The earth shook with each step of her great feet, leaves shuddering on branches as the trees rattled in time. Liam squinted, peering through the woods as they rocketed past them; something huge and dark moved within.
He gave his dinosaur a firm slap against her thickly-scaled neck, and Alice slowed to a walk, cocking her head as the beast within the forest continued slowly along on its way.
Its silhouette was massive and bulky, walking along on two legs; its head was long and blunt, topped with a great, spiky frill, while its tail bounced stiffly behind it.

Its gait and stance seemed to imply a theropod dinosaur-- but a zemoira it wasn't, and it was nearly as tall as Alice herself, with perhaps twice the girth.

What the hell *was it?*

"...Alright, babe. The trees are too tight for you here, but let's swing around and find a way in to have a look at this thing."

He couldn't imagine having missed an entire species in Aensdoun after so many years-- especially something *this* big-- but stranger things had happened.

Alice obediently trotted along the perimeter of the stretch of woodland, searching carefully for a way in after the strange dinosaur.
The forest was expansive; each step seemed to take them farther away from the mysterious beast. Liam found himself almost wishing it had been interested enough in them to come running-- at least then, he could've seen its face before it vanished...

Alice whirled, nosing her way through a clearing and into the wood, struggling to contain her excitement as they searched for the new dinosaur. But Liam was disheartened; the creature seemed to have vanished into the deep forest well before their arrival.

"Damn it all! Ah well, Alice-- something like that can't hide for long, can it?" he said, fondly patting the dinosaur's head.

Alice shrieked in agreement, turning carefully around to make her way back into the open fields.
Liam leaned against the zemoira's scaly back, sighing. He was excited at the thought of something new to potentially track, catch, and tame, but the possibility of the thing having been a one-time sighting nearly broke his heart.
The organized factions could have their relics and history; it was the beasts of Aensdoun he was after, and he'd be damned if he gave up so easily.

A flash of bright color sped through the tall grass down below; Liam blinked, leaning carefully over to the side to look. Red, green, yellow, blue... what *now?*

"Alice, what the hell-- do you see that?"

The dinosaur chirped, leaping to one side and snapping her jaws low to the ground; a small swarm of tiny reptiles scattered to avoid her bite, reassembling to run beside her great feet. A few particularly agile ones popped up over the group to leap playfully over her claws as she ran.

“Look at those little guys! I've never seen anything like them before... is someone screwing with me?” Liam grumbled. “It doesn't matter... I gotta see what's going on.

“Alice-- STOP!”

The zemoira halted, skidding through the soft soil with a bellow. The tiny dinosaurs ran in circles around and over her feet.
Liam leapt from Alice's back to land in the grass near them and they scattered immediately, galloping into the trees.

He swore, chasing after them.

“Why, you little... get back here!!”

“*Eeeeek!*”

Something-- no, *someone*-- emerged from the bushes in front of him, too quickly for him to change course. He toppled over them, landing in a tangled heap on the forest floor as brightly-colored dinosaurs bounced and crawled over him.

“...geez. Are you okay?” Reks brushed herself off, pulling her hoodie back over her hair and scooping several of the pilisaurs into her arms.

Liam stared at her.

“Am-- am *I* okay?! Kid, I could've killed you--”

But she was unconcerned.

“Nah!” she giggled. “Anyway, sorry about that. I told them to stop goofing off, but they ran off! Little jerks...”

“These are yours?” Liam frowned. “Are they robots?”

Reks scrunched up her nose, setting one pilisaur atop her head and hugging another. “No way! They're *pilisaurs*. I make them outta dead animal bits!”

“Ah. Robots, then.”

“*Noooooooooooo!* Ugh! You wouldn't understand anyway, I bet. They're alchemagical. Anyway, who're you?” she chirped. “I've never seen you around here!”

Liam sighed, climbing to his feet and looking down at her.

“Name's Liam. I live here-- not in this area, but close. I'm a dinosaur tamer, so when I saw your little ro—erm, *things*, I was a bit surprised. They're good.”

“Hey, thanks!” Reks beamed. “Your dinosaur ain't half bad, either. You've got her trained well! I've never seen a real dinosaur that obedient before.”

"Hatched her myself," Liam said proudly. "So what, do you live around here too? I've never seen another Dremish in these parts myself, save for when the factions come sniffing around. Your clothes are…odd, but you carry yourself like a wildsman."

Reks chewed her lip, squeezing her tankorne against her breast. "Kinda. I travel everywhere, but Aensdoun is my favorite.
The best stuff t'hunt is out here, and then there are the dinosaurs, too. Zemoiras are totally my favorite-- yours is super-pretty!"

"Thanks. Hey, have you ever seen a kind of huge carnivore around here with a spiky frill? I saw one of those today, and I don't have any identification for it. I was pretty sure I'd seen every big dinosaur Aensdoun had to offer by now."

Reks squinted at him. "A-nope! I don't think anything like that exists. Maybe it was a leupak?"

Liam nearly choked. "You're *kidding*. Do leupaks come in dinosaur flavor?"

"Leupaks come in *every* flavor. Even cherry and chocolate and marshmallow," she said matter-of-factly. "But yeah, I bet you that's what it was… man! I wish I had been around to see it. A big o'l dinopak would be the killerest thing *ever!*"

Liam was visibly less thrilled by the prospect.

"Say, Li-- do you mind if I call you that? Canni ride on your zemoira for a little while? It would make me so happy you have no friggin' idea."

Liam laughed.

"Only if you tell me some more about your peelythings."

Reks shook his hand with surprising ferocity. "Aw man, you got yourself a deal! C'mon, *Let's go!!*"

Book I Chapter XIII: The Aen'och Prophecy

Heaven's Pillar Forest, Aensdoun

The blazing warmth of Aensdoun welcomed the Firestarters home, heat flooding over faces and wings as griffins, dragons, and riders swept downward over mammoth trees and grassy plains. Kelan rode on griffinback behind Dilndrou, resting his wings and giving his wounds time to heal from his encounter with the Dreamwaker.

As they approached their destination, hundreds of *Aen'och* tents and bonfires came into view, surrounding the camp on all sides. The native tribes had not decided to tear down the faction structures-- that was some small reassurance.

Dilndrou's griffin landed first, shaking her head gently before sitting to preen. The other beasts followed, settling in twos and threes around them to rest and let their riders dismount.
Kelan rose carefully to his feet, giving the griffin a light scratch behind the ear as his people returned to their duties around the camp.

"We have time to strategize-- the situation is dire, but at least we aren't dead yet," Kelan said, turning to face Dilndrou and Ireliss as they came to his side."On top of that, the tribes haven't opted to raze our camp while we were away, which is a definite plus. I was almost certain they'dve jumped at the chance."

"They knew you'd be back, and with dragons," Ireliss pointed out. "They might kill the people we'd left behind and burn our buildings down, but even with our diminished ranks they'd stand no chance against a handful of Flarions and a small army of trained men."

"They were frightened," said one of the officers who had remained behind as the aerial division left to investigate Chimre, "but not of *us*. Shortly after you took flight, m'lord, the skies opened up overhead; was like something burned it away, and everyone took note. Most of the Aen'och ran for the trees, but after a while they came back around, and sent messengers over here to ask for an audience with you. We told them you'd gone, but we'd let you know once you returned."

Kelan rose a brow. "Did they, now."

"Yes, sir. Well, at least I think so," he admitted. "The messengers were incredibly frantic. They shouted something to the effect of "the Kaelan, the Kaelan, we misunderstood, please let us see him," along with a bit of "help, help" and "oh gods we don't understand"." The officer frowned.

"...The... *Kaelan*? As in--"

"As in "The Kaelan and the Ban'leane", yes. I imagine they think..."

Kelan cut him off with a handwave. "It's better than the house arrest and threat they've been keeping our ground troops under since they arrived. We can possibly work with this. Ireliss, Dilndrou? Accompany me, please."

Dilndrou smirked faintly."Ah, that old-time Aen'och superstition. Yes, we'll make certain none of them attempt to skin and mount you."

Shortly after the Firestarters set up camp in Aensdoun, the Aen'och tribes took notice of them. Kelan had not expected them to put up much resistance, assuming they would be too busy warring with one another to bother.

He had assumed wrongly.

The Aen'och decided to move their camps in order to surround and trap the outsiders in the midst of their battles.
They fought brutally amongst themselves to win precious food and resources in the harsh Anshe wilderness, and upon realizing that they'd aquired a new 'tribe' to compete against-- heavily-armored and well-trained or not-- the chieftains had worked quickly to eliminate the possibility of having their spoils swept out from under them.
Although clever, the maneuver only served to neutralize the Firestarters' grounded men; they remained in camp to defend the grounds, building, planning, and sending out correspondance via hawk while the soldiers with aerial mounts simply flew overhead to find food and

materials.

The Aen'och were less than pleased. The tribes quickly became fond of picking off any individuals they could successfully corner and attack out in the wilds.
With the Firestarters on the defensive, they only had to fear retribution from the Flarions that occasionally arrived at camp-- the dragons were allies, but much more likely to retaliate as the casualty number rose.

Kelan had been concerned that the tribes would work together just long enough to put their campgrounds to the torch once the aerial rangers and Flarions had departed for Chimre, but apparently the opening of the Veil had discouraged them.

The messengers' words gave Kelan a reasonable guess as to why.

With Dilndrou and Ireliss close at hand, the Flamekeeper made his way out into the camps that had kept his men well-surrounded for weeks. The Aen'och scurried into their tents and huddled around their fires, giving him wide-eyed stares and murmuring to themselves under their breath as the trio advanced.

None threatened them.

There were three tribes surrounding the Firestarters camp. In normal circumstances, they would be battling for dominance even as they kept the foreigners tightly locked within the circle, the dead and dying of all three tribes strewn about the field where they fell.
Today, there was no fighting-- only fearful and nervous Aen'och flitting through the camps, quietly meeting with one another, sharing meat and bread and rumors as if they were one tribe. The people of Aensdoun were far from friendly; alliances such as the ancient Aen'och Trior had died out with Kelan's people as suspicions grew, it seemed.

The opening of the Veil had cowed them somehow-- or perhaps there was more to it than that.

Kelan paused, glancing out over the elven camps. Each tribe had its own chief, who had their own tent; he could make them out over the crowd if he looked carefully, but all three were well apart. Attempting to visit each tribe's leader individually would be an exhausting task-- and worse, it was likely that the other two tribes would take offense if their people had seen him ducking into a tent that was not their own.

Striding into the open fields, Kelan turned to face the campgrounds and drew a breath.

"PEOPLE OF AENSDOUN-- I HAVE RETURNED TO YOU!"

The soft murmur of hundreds of voices fell silent almost at once. Kelan could see tents opening as *Aeneski* slipped out of them to answer the call; before long, the chieftains emerged with their servants.
He drew a slow, deep breath as he waited; in moments, he would see whether the tribes were converging to speak to him, or simply to tear him apart.

He wasn't certain which answer he preferred.

"Kaelan!" shouted a clarion voice, loud and sharp; accustomed to calling orders over the din of battle, Kelan recognized the speaker as one of the three chieftains. She wore claws and teeth braided into her pale hair, standing proudly in armor crafted from the hides of dinosaurs. Her expression was hard, her gray eyes glinting in the sunlight.

"Our ancestors sung songs of you, your strange eyes and wings of flame. Our seers whispered tales of you, coming forth from the forests with an army the color of autumn, heralding the falling skies.

We saw your wings burning, and as you flew from here, the sky fell. *Kaelan!*"

The Aen'och people roared and chanted, all eyes on him. Kelan wanted nothing more than to glance to Dilndrou or Ireliss, to turn his head for support and reassurance.

He didn't dare.

"You hunt in our lands, drink our water, take our food," came a second voice, a child's shrill shout. The second chieftain was but a boy, though he was draped in fine fur and adorned with brilliant, gilded feathers.

"The ancestral lands feed your alien people. The beasts that take our blood shy from yours; we have seen them turn from you to bite us and rend our flesh, as if you were allies with the wilds themselves. Your people call, and the rains and suns answer. We slay your kin, and golden dragons rise to burn ours. We hold you prisoner, and the world itself conspires against us. Who are you, stranger? What worm of the far lands falls in mighty Aensdoun to sprout wings and roar?"

"Be silent, fool child!" cried a third and haughty voice. "The earth and sky betray you because you screech too loudly to hear them."
The third chieftain sat upon a throne carved from the bones of dragons, dressed in a cape of severed wings and crowned with a circlet of flowers, each petal glowing in a hundred colors.
He shifted in his seat, gently stroking a hatchling drake sitting upon his lap.

"These are the Destined People, descended from the Old Tribes. Remnants of the lost age, when the Trior fell to the Ban'leane's poisonous magics. That same magic has eaten the sky, and my tribe feels it seeping from the lost grounds and into the good Anshe earth.

"The lorekeepers wrote books about this day-- of the coming of the Kaelan to bring the tribes to prosperity. We fought, and our fathers fought, and our fathers' fathers... struggle was all we knew, without gods or kings to protect our people from ruin. Our magics can coax the wilds to serve us for a moment, but only the Kaelan can tame our lands so that we may reunite and face a true and worthy foe.
We all heard the Ban'leane's cry; we saw and felt the planet shudder and crack as his magic tore forth from its belly. My tribe needs no greater proof beyond that which we felt and heard, and that which we have seen before us.

"Kaelan! Our people who paint scales are now *your* people!" the chieftain shouted, and the Aen'och Dracha bellowed in agreement.

The child chieftain scowled, leaning to the side to whisper into the ear of one of his servants.

"The Aen'och Dracha are dreamers, easily swayed by fairytales," he shouted at last. "Your men are strong, but foreign folk have bled the people of Aensdoun before. The sky has fallen, but in far lands the stars rise at noon and the suns sleep for months. The Ban'leane is long dead-- any fae knows this much. Why should we believe you are the Kaelan? We have heard tales of men who shape flesh with knives and potions in the far lands. Perhaps you are a new witch!"

"And so the Visk continue a tradition of paranoia," the woman chief laughed. "Kaelan, our people who smile know you. We were wary when you first came forth from the trees, but *I* know you. The wilds know you as well, and when you came, the old prophecies rode upon your wings. We of the Aen'och Glen are your people. We will stand proudly with you against the nightmares the Ban'leane spawns from the mouth of the otherworld, and die proudly beside you if fate wills it. The old tales said that the Aen'och would reunite under your fiery wings, and it would honor us to be among the first."

Kelan swallowed; the Aen'och Visk aside, this was *certainly* a change of tone.
As the Dracha and Glen tribes chanted at him and the Visk watched with dark glances, he cleared his throat, took a step forward and leapt into the air, hovering where the Anshe could all see.

"I was born in these lands as Sheanh Kelan, speaker of the wind goddess Aqk when the great beasts still walked among us. I lived among the Aen'och Trior, and I lived and grew alongside the faerie the legends and tales call the Ban'leane. I knew him as a friend and brother, once," he added, lowering his eyes.

"I watched as his crystal consumed the Trior people. He yet lives, and I have just returned from his lands far beyond the sea, where he has torn the world open with that same crystal. He was once a mortal man, just as I was, but now he is a monster that feeds upon the very lifeblood of Valenth as well as the people who live within it.He seeks to plunge the whole of the world into the realm of dreams. He has failed once, but I am certain he intends to try again... and I intend to stop him from succeeding."

Kelan gazed out over the Aen'och and his own men as they watched and listened in silence.

"Whether you believe my tale or not, whatever you believe is happening in the lands beyond this place where the sky has torn open, you are all welcome to join me in my task. I will extend the same offering to any other tribes that may wish to follow me. Under my wing, the Aen'och will no longer be fragmented and scattered across Aensdoun, but together as one to defend our ancestral home and heal Valenth's wounds.

"We will march from one end of Aensdoun to the other, gathering as many tribes as we can to unite under our banner. Once our task is complete, these lands will be ours to tend and hunt-- but we will do so respectfully. My people will teach you all there is to learn, and in turn you will share your knowledge with us.

“When the time comes, those willing will cross the sea with me, and we will close the Veil and lock the Ban'leane away behind it. Those of you who choose to stay will continue tending to the ancestral lands. My dragons and griffins will not harm any member of this alliance, and the wild beasts and the elements will serve you loyally.

“Any tribes who choose to decline will be left to live in peace as they choose. My people will not war with yours unless you provoke them-- do so at your own peril,” he stressed.

The Aen'och began to chatter and whisper, their faces and voices full of excitement, curiosity and fear. The three chieftains spoke with their subjects as Kelan and his two companions watched in silence.

It was the Dracha chieftain who lifted his head first. “Kaelan, we will join your great army. What would you ask of us? We are your eyes and ears, and our foes will despair at our approach.”

“The Glen smile upon you, Kaelan,” the Aen'och Glen chieftain agreed, her expression bright. “We will honor you with songs and feasts as the moon rises. Speak, and we will obey.”

The little Visk chieftain scowled, crossing his arms over his chest. “The Visk will submit,” he muttered. It would be of no use to compete with two united tribes and the foreign elves for food and shelter-- and there was no telling what might happen if the winged outsider should succeed in his task of uniting the rest of the scattered tribes throughout the land. “We are your people, for good or ill.”

Kelan nodded slowly, keeping the swelling joy in his heart from showing upon his face. There would be time for celebration later, and there were difficult times ahead. There were many Aen'och tribes, and he was certain a number of them would not yield without a fight... or at all.

And in the meantime, there would be changes that even the willing Dracha and Glen would dislike.

“From this moment on, we are a people united, the Aen'och Kaelan,” Kelan announced. “You will treat your former foes as brothers, as well as any new tribes that join with us along the way. We serve the wilds, the elements, and the people of Valenth-- you will be fed, defended, and cared for, and in turn you will extend those same gifts to others.

“And from this moment onward, the old Aen'och tradition of sacrificing blood-haired and Strange children as they come of age is abolished forevermore. Anyone who unjustly puts a person of the Aen'och Kaelan to death will answer to *me*.”

Book I Chapter XIV: Bad Nerves

Heaven's Pillar Forest, Aensdoun

"Aensdoun is even cooler when you're riding a dinosaur," Reks announced, gently stroking Alice's neck as she rode through the towering forest with Liam seated just behind her.

The cities of the world were interesting enough, and she enjoyed doing her taxidermy work in the comfort of a suitably-cluttered room, but musty rooms full of old books weren't nearly as awesome as sprawling wildernesses full of stuff to chase and catch and poke with sticks.

Adding a big, friendly zemoira to the mix was just rubbing it in.

"Isn't much you have to worry about out here from a perch like this, either," Liam agreed, gazing out through the gaps between the massive trees, seeming like archways in a grand cathedral crafted of living wood. "You're free to ride and explore at your leisure, provided you don't pick any fights..."

Alice let out an excited shriek, snaking through an opening in the trees to eye a group of *Aeneski* advancing across the plains to the north.

"Strange." Liam scratched his cheek. "The tribes generally don't travel like that-- they patrol around their own campgrounds, but they're usually too busy defending their own territory to go out looking for more. I wonder what's gotten them on the move."

"Maybe a dinosaur ate their camp!" Reks offered. "That'd be a pretty good reason to... to..."

The little hooded elf scrunched her nose and perked her ears, wrapping her arms around her chest.

"...No. No, something's not right. Li--"

Liam watched with growing concern as the group of marching faeries continued to grow, streaming out into the Infinite Green by the hundreds. No single tribe in Aensdoun was that large or organized.

They were no *single* tribe.

The turquoise-on-blue of the Aen'och Glen people mingled with the dusty gray and rust-red of Dracha garb, sprinkled throughout with glints of solid green armor that belonged to no Aen'och tribe Liam knew. Even the brilliant gold and violet of the Aen'och Visk had ample representation among the swarming ranks.

Liam felt Reks' strong arms grab him before he realized he had nearly fallen from Alice's back in his shock.

"Hey, careful! You coulda broken your neck!!" Her voice was shrill and quavering. "What's going on?"

"The tribes... the tribes are marching *together as one*," Liam breathed, righting himself again. "It shouldn't be possible. The Anshe have fought amongst one another for as long as anyone can remember, for land and food and simply for the sake of intimidation. Something like this is unprecedented..."

Suddenly, a figure with wings glowing in the sunlight like fire drifted gracefully into view as they watched, clad in gleaming green plate. As it flew over the advancing army, the tribesmen gave way to more armored soldiers, some traveling on foot while others rode upon the backs of big red deer.

Liam drew in a breath.
Reks' eyes grew huge and wide; she seemed to shrink, drawing herself down against Alice's back as she stared.

"Th-th-th-th-th, th-thththh*that's*..."

"I'll be damned, it's the Flamekeeper," Liam swore. "Guess the old legends about the Kaelan and the Ban'leane had some substance to them after all."
He didn't expect Reks's backhanded slap-- and by her squeal of surprise, neither had she.

"*Yeow!* Hey, what the hell, kid?!" he growled, reaching to rub his cheek.

"Aaaiee, Liam, I'm so sorry!!" Reks eyed her hand accusatorily, as though it were another person. "Bad hand, *bad!* You don't hit friends! *Geeze!*"

Liam shook his head. "Heh, it's fine. Was it something I said?"

Reks glanced up at him, biting her lip; her face was pale, sweat beading on her forehead.
When she opened her mouth to speak, the words fell out all at once.

"N-no. I think I'm just a bit nervous, that's all! I don't know why it did that," she laughed weakly, her eyes darting about. "I've never seen the Flamekeeper before! I mean, I've never seen a *Chapter* before. I mean, I don't really see him very well since he's pretty far away but it's almost like he's right here, the way... Don't you feel it? I... Ohh, I don't feel too good, Liam!"

The big *Aeneski* grunted.

"Mm, you don't *sound* too good, either. Listen, want to find a place to rest while they're passing by? It looks like he's managed to force all three of the local tribes to play nice for a bit, so it'll take some time for them to finish coming through."

Reks glanced silently out at the marching crowd, her hands trembling slightly.
The winged figure in the distance seemed to turn towards them and stare at her, wings flashing gold and red.

"L-l-listen, Li, you go on ahead, okay?" She whimpered. "I've... I've gotta pee *real bad*, th-that's all. I'll come find you once you've made camp for the night, promise!"

Before Liam could reply, she hurled herself bodily from Alice's back, landing on her hands and knees as the pilisaurs gathered around her.

Rising to her feet, she looked over her shoulder once more before bolting into the bushes and vanishing without a sound.

"I got you, kid," Liam grunted to himself, giving Alice a pat. "The only people I ever seen panic that bad over a pyro were smugglers and mutants. It ain't that hard to figure out..."

Book I Chapter XV: The Rekspedition

Heaven's Pillar Forest, Aensdoun

Reks bolted through the forest as fast as her powerful legs would carry her, leaping clear over low branches and shrubs and vaulting through tiny gaps in the mammoth trees, whooping triumphantly with every leap.
Her pilisaurs trotted along at her sides, skirting around and over obstacles as she launched herself over them. It was a game she had loved to play since she was a kid, swooping around through trees and around tightly-packed forests as quickly as she could.
It had resulted in more than a few bruises and broken bones, but that was nothing Reks didn't know how to take care of, thanks to lots of basic medical training.

She tumbled gracefully into the middle of a familiar clearing, pulling herself upwards into a handstand, walking a few steps and rolling sideways into a cartwheel before flopping facefirst into the dirt. Blinking, Reks shook her head and laughed, reaching out to stroke the back of a nearby seraptor as she got to her feet and looked around.
The Trior Village was still intact—well, as intact as it had been the last time she had set up camp here. She knew the Silent Rose had sent an expedition here while she was away, but it seemed as though they hadn't upset too much in her absence.

A few new footprints, a rather hilarious-looking *man-print* (she felt a little better realizing she wasn't the first person to topple over in the village), and a few unimportant missing trinkets and bones. No biggie.

"They must not've stayed too long. I guess that was the same group Na'th led... did they leave early because he got hurt?" she considered, chewing on her lip and peering down her shirt at her dreamshard.
Frowning, she yanked the little chain off of her neck; the tiny metal links popped open easily.

"Kelan won't come here to look for me-- I bet there's prolly way too much mirajin for even him! It should be safe from everybody."
Satisfied, she tightened her hand into a fist around the dreamshard and hurled it into the trees.
No one would be stumbling into this area by mistake; the toy dreamshard was useful for tricking people in Chimre who might ask too many questions if they saw her without one, but she could let her guard down here without worry.

"Home sweet home!

Well, *other* home. Other-other-other home," Reks announced brightly, scooping up a pilisaur to hug and carry as she picked through the abandoned buildings, kicking stones away as she walked.
She dug through old, partially-crystallized bones and rotted clothes, watching strange insects skitter away into leaf litter and doing her best to mimic the calls of the mutant birds that sang out in the woods. Time mostly stood still here; she had thoroughly examined this village lots of times, but with no more people and few creatures capable of coming this far into the cursed Trior territory, there was little to upset the things that had fallen and settled ages ago.

Pushing into the woods again, Reks was delighted to find a bush teeming with fat little berries, their skins sparkling in the light like cut gemstones. She gathered a handful and popped them into her mouth, happily chewing on them as the pilisaurs swarmed at her feet, gazing expectantly up at her.

"What?!" She finally said, pouting. "You can't *eat*, stupids! You're constructs!"
Considering a moment, Reks sighed and relented, scattering a handful of berries upon the ground for the little creatures to snap up eagerly.

"Oh, *fine*. I guess you can still pretend if you wanna."

Having eaten her fill of the crystal berries, Reks filled one of the pockets of her bag with them before continuing on her way, carefully working into the dense woods surrounding the village.
All the trees had turned to crystal, too-- it looked a lot like Chimre, except bigger somehow. All sorts of strange sounds filled the air, setting the trees to vibrating and chiming, but Reks couldn't see any of the creatures that were making them.
With a dejected sigh, she hopped over a tiny stream-- squeaking as her shoes squelched into the mud on the other side. As she pulled her feet up from the mud, they *popped* one after the other as the thick goo pulled away, filling her footsteps in as soon as they were revealed.
The little stream seemed to swell into a river, which suddenly became a whole swamp just across the way. The earth was way too sticky on this side for attempting to check it out to be of much use, so she traveled around it, her feet squishing and popping in and out of the mud as

she went.

"Whew," she gasped, grabbing hold of a tree branch to pull herself out onto the grass and catch her breath.

"This is a lot of hard work! I dunno how the Mod'han managed to run around *on* the mud when I can't even walk through it."
Eyeing her shoes for a moment, she shrugged, wriggling her feet out of them and stepping barefoot into the soil before continuing on her way around the water with only marginally more success.
The water was far too murky to see if there were any fish or alligators in it, so Reks kept her distance, urging the little leather dinosaurs to stay well away from the edge with her.

She had only just begun to walk around the bend when she saw the little hut, tucked neatly into a wall of tall swampgrass and reeds.

"Oh, *ohh!!*" she cried excitedly, all exhaustion forgotten as she headed towards the structure in a floppy half-run, her toes slick with mud and grass.

Pushing past the overgrowth and weeds, she admired the beauty of the little old swamp shack. Lashed together with wood and sinew and decorated with stretched and painted animal skins, it was a fair sight more primitive than the buildings found in the village. Fearsome, toothy skulls hung from each point of the roof, glowering accusatorily down at her. She grinned back, enchanted; this was the best place she'd found in Aensdoun yet.
She pushed the ratty old fabric hung from the doorway aside and slipped in.

It only got better.

The interior of the little hut was not just well-lived, but *something* fascinating had happened inside.
Sparsely decorated, the little hut had a dirt floor secured by reed mats, with old furs and skins full of holes strewn about. A poorly-aged basket full of fish skeletons sat in one corner, and an enormous painted alligator skull accented with bird feathers sat proudly upon an otherwise bare wall.

The entire room had been splattered with what seemed to be ancient, flaking blood... along with a thick, iridescent green goo that had long since dried and hardened.

Reks squealed with delight, shuffling over to admire the alligator skull. Glancing over her shoulder-- just in case-- she leaned in close and snaked her tongue out to taste the funny green goop. It had a familiar tang; her eyes widened, and she snatched the mask from the wall, plopping it down upon her head.

No-- *this* was home.

Bristling with excitement, Reks looked around the room again, noting a panel in the floor was slightly loose. She shuffled over and pried it open, peering down into the darkness.
Her keen eyes made out stacks of books settled upon the floor, the walls covered in row upon row of jars and bottles. Disembodied eyes and well-preserved bits of meat drifted in clear amber liquid.
She dropped down into the room, running her fingertip over the dusty glass jars as she examined the contents of each one, wonder plain on her face.
A familiar, striped invertebrate drifted lifelessly inside one, the bottom full of bubbly egg-clusters.
She pulled it down and sat it atop a nearby pile of books, unscrewing the lid to take a closer look at the preserved dire worm.
Its tiny black eyes shone in the dim light-- and suddenly it wriggled, lifting itself far enough out of the goo to open its lamprey-like mouth and croak threateningly at her, its favorite flavor of meat just out of reach.

The lid went back on as quickly as she had removed it; tightly sealed, she wrapped the jar in a scrap of fur and slid it into her bag.

Glancing around, she saw more bones in the far corners of the room; *Aeneski* bones by the look of it, picked clean of flesh, crushed and cracked and scraped by sharp teeth in places.
Bounding over for a closer look, she tilted her head and whistled.

If the same creature was responsible for all of these bones, it had been an *Aeneski*, too.

“This place... this place is *wicked cool*,” Reks breathed, blinking to try and soothe her watery eyes.
It was probably just all the dust, even if she wanted nothing more than to pick up the entire little house and carry it home with her.
Plopping down to sit on the floor, she upset the books; they toppled, falling into her lap in a messy pile. She plucked the topmost one up, glancing at the blank leatherbound cover before flipping it open and paging through. The entire thing was written in old Aengoch-- but she had been taught to both read and write it even before she had learned the modern tongue.

Something caught her eye and she stopped, leaning in close to read. The author was rambling at length about something called a “Philosopher's Stone”-- apparently an alchemical tool used for turning stuff into other stuff.
She wondered if it could turn frogs into ice cream, but the penman was too busy talking about what was needed to make one... and the fact that they hadn't done a very good job of finding the right ingredients.

I only have a fortnight to let the stone cure and form, and I've wasted much of my spare time scouring the area for components. I believed I had found what I was looking for out in the field, but upon returning home I now have second thoughts.
My life is forfeit if I fail this test; if I cannot become a full-honors Murkshaman, the Trior will surely take my life, and there shall be little my Master can do to dissuade them a second time.
I will hunt one last time around the shore of the swamp for a closer match to the herbs I require, but I must begin the crafting process on the morrow.

I despise the working of magic almost as much as I despise the Aen'och.

Almost.

Furrowing her brow, Reks licked her finger and turned the page.
There was only a single sentence there, the rest of the book blank.
Her eyes grew wide.

... *Something's gone wrong*, it said.

“...This is seriously...!!”

Reks leapt to her feet, stuffing as many of the books into her bag as she could force inside.

Book I Chapter XVI: Preparations

Darkling Woods, South Dreamsong

Elliot walked slowly through the camp as it rose around her, twenty of the Project's finest constructing tents, securing the perimeter, distributing equipment and making themselves as comfortable as they were like to get.

This would be their home for the next few weeks; with the help and well-wishes of the people of Valenth, the Veil Expedition was finally beginning.

She'd had no idea what sort of turnout she had expected for the donation drive, but the final numbers were staggering. Elliot had never seen such a sum in her life, even checking the Somnambulist Project's books or planning budgets for important research.

She supposed *this* study was well worth *1.3 billion krus*; it was likely the most important one her little organization would ever run by far.
The money would keep them fed, watered, and sheltered for several weeks-- they had purchased the finest dreamshards money could buy for the entire expedition party, as well as personal mirometers and even medicine, just in case it became necessary.

With a faint smile, she turned to slip through the trees, gazing up at the massive copper dragon that sat in a nearby clearing.
There had been more than enough money left over to purchase fuel and upgrades for the Vigilant, as well; while the rest of the expedition would be surveying the lands around the Veil's perimeter, she would be climbing into the jaws of the beast itself from within her robot.

Grey's invention was as solidly-built as any automaton Elliot had ever seen; after tangling with several massive and very angry Flarion dragons, she had little doubt that it would protect her from the worst mutants the Veil could throw at her.
Originally built for defense, she commissioned MIRACLE energy to install a set of recording equipment into the metal monster. Notes were always useful, but recorded footage of the new ecosystem and the creatures within it would prove invaluable.
As an extra precaution, she'd had the cockpit fitted with a custom dreamshard, as well.

She leaned against the enormous robot, closing her eyes with a soft sigh as the warm metal pressed against her cheek.

Hopefully, it would be enough.

Book I Chapter XVII: Mirage

Camp Sleepwalker
Darkling Woods, South Dreamsong

Elliot gazed out over the expedition camp, watching fondly as her colleagues milled about with their journals, sharing meals and notes as they surveyed and recorded their findings.
With a little good fortune, hopefully they would all be safe and happy here, free to do their work without fear.

With a bit more luck, perhaps she would live to see them again soon.

Scooping up her helmet, she slid it on and pulled the release on the Vigilant Defender's cockpit, its chest sliding open so she could climb inside and strap herself in.
With a loud, low rumble, the robotic guardian came to life as its engine started, lights flickering on behind Elliot's seat.
She waved to the other researchers through the diamondglass window before the great metal dragon lurched into the deeper woods.

Controlling the robot with practiced skill, she used its powerful claws to pry open and pull away thick swaths of crystallized vegetation, clearing a path for free travel as much as to help find her way home when the time came.
This part of Dreamsong had transformed into a tiny replica of Chimre thanks to the elevated miradiation. While crystaltrees were once only found in the Limbo Penninsula, just before the Chimri border, now the vast majority of the old wood had turned to shimmering ice in a few weeks' time. Animals-- or what were *once* animals-- cried and sang all around, their voices ethereal and haunting. The reflective trees threw and echoed their voices, and a chill shot down her spine.

Gathering her wits about her, Elliot began to tinker with the Vigilant's new recording attachments, activating the video and stillframe cameras and checking the microphones. Turning the cameras with the dashboard controls, she caught sight of two cities in the distance.

Axl, glittering in the light as if cut from glass, and Jetersborough farther to the south, seemingly crumbling into the ocean. Gasping softly, she worked the controls, zooming her cameras in closer.

Gier's twin had been divided by the Veil's soapbubble-like form; one half just outside, the other consumed by the massive aetherhole. The buildings were intact, but the stone and wood had been transformed and crystallized-- and massive, thick vines and tree limbs had grown explosively out of the surrounding forest, grasping and constricting any structure they could wrap around, from homes and businesses built on solid land to the docks and the ships that had failed to escape. Enormous vines had dragged some boats away from the water, smashing others into the wooden platforms or into each other.
One particularly unlucky vessel been lifted high into the air by a single, towering tendril. Turned and held upside down, its cargo and any passengers must have been upended onto the ground and waters below.

Elliot winced, turning and focusing the camera for a better look at Jetersborough.

Swallowed completely by the Veil, its silhouette was shimmering and uncertain in the undulating violet light-- but the structural damage the former Court capital had sustained was obvious. The skyline looked as though it had been torn apart by massive hands; once-sturdy stone buildings had cracked and crumbled away, leaving iron skeletons stabbing skyward from the city's corpse.
It was too far to see the streets or docks from here even with the high-powered camera, but one detail was as terrifying as it was absolute-- no Dreamsong native would have missed its significance.

When Jetersborough's skies had once been full of wheeling birds and Erosions, there now were *none*.

Shaken to her core, Elliot led her robotic beast deeper into the woods. The canopy swallowed up the sky, taking the ruined cities out of sight-- but far from out of mind. She rode in grim and stoic silence, directing the Vigilant to push and tear through alien overgrowth towards the heart of the infection.
The effect the Veil had had on the surrounding area was monumental; Darkling Woods had been a simple temperate forest biome several weeks ago. Her people could focus on the smaller details of that transformation, as much as she ached to spend several days in the area herself.

With a final push, she made her way into an enormous clearing; the trees had literally melted, twisted, and eroded away, leaving scorched

earth and patches of raw miracrystal, shining with a soft magenta light all their own.

The Veil towered before her, curving up into the heavens as if it sought to devour them as well. The sky had burned away, leaving nothing but stark black space and diamond-dust stars staring down. The anomalous structure hummed and buzzed, its soap-bubble surface rippling with a spectrum of color as sparks danced and shot across it.
Where it met the ground, crystals sprung like mushrooms, oozing a thick, pink goo that seeped over the earth, bubbling and pulsing as if with a life of its own.

Miraplasm-- pure, concentrated mirajin. Any creature foolish or unlucky enough to touch it or get the tiniest drop upon them... Elliot shuddered, forcing her robot closer despite her fear.
Sticky pools of the viscous pink liquid had formed throughout the clearing, the edges hardening into miracrystal.

"I've truly lost my mind," she murmured, and the Vigilant Defender took a step closer.

The cockpit was only a few feet shy of breaching the Veil's surface; the world of dreams gazed out at her, and as she looked back, she felt an unpleasant pressure growing within her brain. Her eyes began to strain, twisting and twitching without her input.

"Well... there's science to do. Vigil, don't steer me wrong... and protect me, for the Chapters' sakes. Here we go..."

Gritting her teeth, she directed the automaton in.
Great, sticky streams of miraplasm burst into existence where the glass and metal touched the bubble, pouring thickly down the window. The Vigilant's engine roared and trembled as it advanced, pushing steadily through to the other side.

The miraplasm trickled and dripped away from the window, revealing a green, shimmering forest, lazily distorting and rippling in Elliot's view. She clenched her eyes shut for a moment as nausea bubbled up and then faded again.

The trees seemed to form a perfect hallway before her-- but vines wrapped and curled around them, moving like serpents as Elliot watched. Buds grew and burst from them, exploding into thousands of colorful flowers swarming with bees, while fireflies in great, swirling masses swept through the scene, blinking and flashing.
She thought she saw several words appear in the sparkling cloud, but they faded and flew away before she could read them.

...*Elliot,* whispered a soft and familiar voice.
Starting at once, she glanced over her shoulder, her head aching terribly and her heart thundering within her chest.

She might simply be hearing things, but if this *was* really the Reverie...

Movement within the cockpit caught her eye; a single, fat drop of miraplasm oozed through the gap where glass met metal upon the ceiling. She tried to lean out of the way with a cry of terror-- but there was nowhere to run, strapped securely into the Vigilant's cockpit.

The mutagenic liquid dripped down, landing with a wet *splat* upon her right glove. The leather soaked it up as though it were cotton, apparently unharmed.
But Elliot felt the inner lining twitch and wriggle; it tightened around her hand as it transformed, growing soft and slick against her skin, like warm meat. Feeling the urge to vomit swiftly return, she reached to quickly snatch the glove off, but quickly reconsidered.

The... *thing* seemed harmless, and it was better to have the protection than not, especially here.

If it wasn't, it was already too late, more like than not.

The mutant glove pulsed and twitched around her hand, seeming to massage it. She sighed, glancing up to make certain no more miraplasm had found its way in.

"Elliot?"

This time, she *knew* she had heard it.
Snapping her head up, Elliot gazed out the cockpit window. She saw nothing and no one, save the arboreal wonderland outside...

... and the Vigilant's arms, which were no longer metal-plated, but coated in warm, coppery scales, each finger tipped with a dark, sharp talon.

The Vigilant Defender snaked its neck downwards, turning to gaze in at Elliot through the cockpit window, blue eyes bright and muscles twitching beneath living flesh.

Book I Chapter XVIII: Magenta Sunrise

Jetersborough, South Dreamsong

The suns rose on Jetersborough.

Brilliant light shone through the warped mass of dreamspace that had engulfed the city, twisted and distorted into beautiful arcs of color that painted the skies and tumbled across the fallen city like so much spilt paint.
The remains of Jetersborough's buildings stretched plaintive fingers towards the vibrant skies, many of them nothing but iron frames surrounded by rubble.

The low, mournful cry of a raven echoed across the ruined city. It was answered by its flockmates, and they took to the wing, circling the ruined streets in the colorful morning light.

Strange... *things* scurried through the detritus below, the little twisted mockeries that were once the cities vermin. They fled to the darkness of the ruined buildings as the shadows of coal black wings passed over them.

The flock gathered around the Grand Library, circling the twisted, arcane structure and calling to each other as they surveyed the area.

Unlike the unfortunate vermin, the ravens had changed very little in appearance-- but their minds were sharper than ever, and the descending notes of their mournful calls seemed perhaps a little too complex.
They had claimed the Library as their own in the aftermath of the mirajin explosion, asserting dominance over the once forbidden structure with contempt for its former inhabitants.

The courtyard below was strewn with the twisted remains of the Court's finest, many of them frozen in mid-transformation. Their still-humanoid bodies were grotesque parodies of draconic form; necks stretched impossibly long, shards of bone erupting from flesh like spines or horns, and arms warped into wing-like structures of bones and shredded skin.

Jetersborough's ravens descended on them, calling softly to each other as they settled in to feed.

A body lay sprawled by the door of the Library, its ruined face hidden by a curtain of blonde hair. The ravens pecked at it tentatively, grumbling amongst themselves at the oozing texture of the still warm flesh.

One young raven approached a corpse lying in shadow, cawing softly as he hopped towards it. Tiny creatures-- crablike monsters formed from the arsenic-laced baits the Court had used to keep the city free of unwanted birdlife-- scurried away from him, clicking in disgust.

Encouraged, the young raven leapt forward and pecked at the corpse, the doughy flesh pulling away easily to reveal something that gleamed in the low light. He called softly to himself, picking at the flesh around it until he could grasp it firmly in his beak. The object tore free with a wet *schlurp*.

He shook it for a moment, globs of molten flesh spattering across the cobble, then dropped the item to inspect it. It was an amulet, snapped free from its chain, a pretty design of colorful feathers coated in bright enamel. The young raven cawed happily, snatching it up and taking to the wing before one of his flockmates could take his new-found treasure away.

The suns rose on Jetersborough, and the ravens feasted on its remains in the blazing light.

Book I Chapter XIX: Elliot's Reverie

The Faerie Circle
Dreamsong Veil, The Reverie

"Elliot, I'm not certain it was the best plan to come here," said the copper-scaled dragon, gazing in at her with shining blue eyes.

She *refused* to scream.
Drawing a slow, deep breath, she met the beast's-- *her automech's*-- gaze in fierce defiance of her terror.
"Are you really the Vigilant, or is this just an illusion?" she asked, even though she could feel the answer in her bones.
The creature's body pulsed around her, just beyond the cockpit walls; the lights and sensors flickered in time with the beat of its heart and each breath.

What in hell was she going to tell Grey?

"I *am* the Vigilant," the dragon confirmed, "*for now*. But don't be mistaken; I am very much a figment of your imagination. Those work a little bit differently here within the Reverie, you'll find, so do be careful."

"Got it." She frowned, unbuckling her restraints and coming to the window to take a closer look at him.

"I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't... *this*. Will you be alright out here? It's—"

"Dangerous?" The dragon grinned sharply, unsettling and more than a little familiar. "You needn't worry for me. I know this place well; it's my home, after all."

"But *how?* You haven't been alive all this time, have you?"
Elliot reached backward to grab her journal, and the mutant glove pulsed around her hand. Disgusted, she ripped it off of her hand and hurled it across the cockpit. It rolled limply across the floor, raising a few fingers to reach for her before flopping down again.

"You don't recall, but you've dreamed of me before," he explained. "Many of the places in the Reverie open to dreamers shift and change without warning, preserving little. But we actors form within the minds of the creatures who dream us. I am anchored to you, and when you came here-- with the robotic Vigilant, no less-- your subconscious called me forth from the aether. I've been with you for months, but I've been looking forward to meeting you."

Elliot scrawled hastily into her journal, glancing up periodically to look into the dragon's bright eyes. He watched her with an undeniable fondness; the love of a creature for a kind and beloved master.
Closing the book and setting it aside, Elliot pressed her hands to the diamondglass window.

Vigil pressed one of his own against the opposite side-- where his heart might have been in a different creature.
He sighed, deep and slow."I will take you to see the the remains of Axl, if that is your desire. But you musn't linger here for long. There are terrifying things here, things I could not hope to ever defend you from... things mortals are ill-equipped to witness or understand. The people of the waking world do not easily recall their dreams for their own good."

"I understand," Elliot promised, leaning against the glass for a moment before returning to her seat and strapping herself in again.
She felt dazed and off-balance, her thoughts swirling and flowing like streams of gibberish carrying a few bits of drifting sensicality off to some distant ocean.
She daydreamed about the wonder of everything around her; the squirming, surreal landscape, the robot that had sprung to life around her and spoke to her like a friend she had known all her life...

"Elliot!" Vigil cried, tapping on the glass and snapping her back to her senses."Elliot, you *must* focus. If you let your mind wander too long or too hard, we are both lost."

"Nngh," she murmured, rubbing her eyes. "It feels like I'm asleep, Vige. But I'm actually here, awake... aren't I?"

The dragon dropped onto all fours, pressing into the forest of shining insects and slithering vines."You are. This is how it is, for those who aren't native here and haven't practiced at traveling the Dream. You must remember to stay as alert and aware as you can. If you imagine yourself outside of your cockpit without thinking, so you shall be, and without warning...

"If the wild beasts and wilder circumstances of this place catch you unawares, you will succumb and become a part of it forever."

A child-sized black butterfly with rainbow-speckled wings slapped loudly into the cockpit window, hammering its enormous wings against the glass before lying still. Elliot gaped, watching as the insect's iridescent eyes twitched, seeming to examine her.

Elliot couldn't help but wonder what it might be like, being reborn as a denizen of the Reverie.
She might die to the waking world, but to stay and explore this place forever, full of so much wonder just a few steps inside of the Veil...

Her heart fluttered and thumped in her chest as the butterfly followed suit against the window, and Vigil's heavy, powerful strides shook the ground beneath his feet.

"Not yet, Elliot," Vigil murmured softly, startling her.

"Not *yet?*"

But before he could answer, something immense slammed into the ground to their right, pulverizing the trees that had stood there a moment before.

Vigil cried out, leaping away and taking to the wing at once; as the land *whooshed* away beneath them, Elliot saw the culprit slowly coming into focus.
A hulking, multi-limbed horror with tough, gray skin strode past, crushing the forest effortlessly beneath its feet as it went.
It barely had a head-- just a lump of flesh swelling slightly above its shoulders before tucking back into its chest, two straight rows of six red eyes settled atop it. It swung a long, whiplike tail behind it, and as Elliot watched, it bent into the scattered trees and seemed to filter something up from between them. "*What is--*"

"Leupak," Vigil replied, circling the area to give Elliot ample time to observe and record. He felt her start within his chest, as though his heart had been startled into jumping."Leupaks were first born in Valenth, but the Reverie is where they truly thrive. They are vastly different here, and far more likely to take forms that might cause a creature to be swiftly hunted down as a threat in the waking world... pre-emptively."

"But what could possibly hatch a leupak that massive?" she wondered aloud. "They need hosts to hatch their eggs..."

"Not always. Most larger leupaks can hatch their eggs themselves, if need be.
They aren't the only giants to be found out here, though... and most of the big ones are hatched by the Queen."

Elliot lay back in her chair and closed her eyes, pressing a hand to her head. "The Queen..."

She wondered absently what Nefirian *really* looked like; she couldn't imagine the little *Aeneski* tending to the egg of such a creature.

"Perhaps if he survives the events to come, he'll show you someday... *while your mind is protected by sleep.*"

Vigil snapped his great copper wings, swooping off into the swirling magenta skies as the titanic gray leupak finished its meal far below.

Book I Chapter XX: Field Notes

The Faerie Circle
Dreamsong Veil, The Reverie

The copper dragon soared over the transformed and crystalline landscape once known as Darkling Wood, his wings throwing a wide shadow over the stirring canopies below.
Elliot watched with wide-eyed wonder from the cockpit nestled within Vigil's breast, scanning the area for unusual sights. Axl still loomed in the distance, as faint and ephemeral as a mirage.

Concerned, Elliot bit her lip. “Vigil, how much longer do you think it'll take us to get there? We've been flying for a while already.”

“As long as you believe it will,” the dragon said. “Time, space, and location are relative to the individual here.”

“...oh. *Oh*, I wish I had said something sooner! I've wasted a great deal of time, if that's...” Her words died in her throat as she considered them.

Vigil tucked his neck down to survey the area, swooping in to land in a grassy clearing below. He stretched his wings and folded them against his sides. “There's no need to worry. Time is a concept I have little need for, having been born here. I go where and do what I need as I think to. When other events are taking place around me, I make my use of it, and otherwise it's no trouble.” He gave a little laugh, dropping down on all fours and making his way on foot towards the city.

“Things only happen as people expect them to here, I suppose,” Elliot considered. “So no sunrise and sunset, or growth and decay without them being prompted by someone somehow. But how can such an arrangement function-- and what happens when two people expect two different things?”

Vigil grinned. “What, indeed! More formidable and wishful minds bend the Reverie to their will; a person used to the laws and rules of the material plane will swiftly get too caught up in the details and impossibilities they knew and heeded there to be of much effect for long.The Revere have similar troubles getting by in the waking world. It can be very dangerous to apply our way of life there, even with the use of capable psionics, but a dreamer in the land of dreams has no time for Valenthian concepts such as 'cannot'. This is a world based not in matter, but potential.”

Elliot shook her head. “That's fascinating. Perhaps it's best if I leave the travel to you, and consider other things in the meantime. Vige, how much do you know about the Veil?”

Striding into a hillside covered in fragrant rosebushes,Vigil paused to admire them; he was only temporarily surprised when they began to shuffle away from his feet in a loose group.

Several spun around to watch him with wooden faces as they waddled backwards, their noises pointed upward. Others scattered, hurrying into the cover of the trees and curling into little balls, tucking their paws over their heads. Elliot stifled a giggle, watching with curiosity.

Stepping carefully over the upset pricklepigs, Vigil continued on his way. “The Veil... well, I know some of the backstory and theory behind it; just bits and pieces I've picked up in my travels. To understand what it is and why it functions the way it does, you'll need to know about the Reverie and Valenth, and their natural relation to one another.

“Valenth and the Reverie are two worlds, parallel and connected to each other, but on separate planes of existence. Passing between them physically is a bit difficult to accomplish in most cirumstances-- a hole must be torn through the space seperating the two in order to walk from Valenth into the Reverie, and vice versa. That would normally be an impossible task-- but raw miracrystal can tear and erode the fabric between worlds; aetherholes are the result.

“Most aetherholes that existed in Valenth prior to the opening of the Veil were formed in boralion lairs and other areas of high mirajin concentration, with the Cathedral of a Thousand Roses in Chimre being the largest. That particular pocket of dreamspace was found to lead to the very edge of the Reverie's static lands, and so it's been used as a point of reference for travelers ever since.

“Beyond the border lies the swirling vortex where dreams form, called Entropia; it's considered a no-man's land, and wandering in there is

functional suicide for people from the waking world. Surreal as Stasia may be, it's navigable and largely inhabited by creatures that *might* interpret a traveler as a sentient being."

"So this is Stasia we're in, then?" Elliot asked, watching the last of the pricklepigs disappear into the brush. "I'll assume that Entropia is the place people tend to go while they're dreaming, but I didn't realize there were seperate regions in the Reverie at all."

"Most Valenthians don't," Vigil reassured her. "Many Revere peoples have settlements and territories here, just like people from the waking world do. But most of that's done in Stasia, in part because it's not much use to build a house on a grassy knoll just to turn around and find an erupting volcano in its place. Some natives enter Entropia on various business, but it's generally a playground for the subconscious mind, and considered best left that way."

Considering the coherency and stability of the sorts of dreams Elliot was prone to having, she could easily see the logic behind such a decision. "I suppose the material plane has its charms, after all. Please, do continue."

Vigil nodded."Yes, where was I? *Ah!* The Cathedral of a Thousand Roses exists in both planes at once, thanks to the influence of the Fatis Mirajin. On Valenth, it's within the city of Laps-du-Ment, while its Revere counterpart is surrounded by the mirror city of Laps-Lucienne. It's considered the southern end of Stasia, while on the opposite end of the region to the north lies the leupak city of Borealis, also just within the border.

"In the past, if you were to enter the Reverie from the Cathedral, you'd arrive in Laps-Lucienne without question. Aetherholes found elsewhere throughout Valenth would deposit you somewhere in Stasia between Laps-Lucienne and Borealis-- and those two points on opposite sides of a given portal would never change.

"Now is where the Veil comes in. In the past, every aetherhole that has been opened between Valenth and the Reverie was a simple doorway; you'd step through from a given point on one side, and step out into a corresponding point on the other. Neither realm gained or lost anything beyond the creatures that were moving between them and any objects they carried with them.

"But the Veil is *not* a traditional aetherhole *or* portal," Vigil stressed. "It may have begun as one, opened from the very heart of the Cathedral, but a spell was cast that caused the initial portal to expand exponentially... as well as generating a force that started to tear Valenth itself into the Reverie."

"...That's... that's *possible?*" Elliot squeaked, feeling suddenly dizzy.

"That's the catch," Vigil replied. "In the material world? Absolutely not. In the Reverie? Possibility is simply a measure of your own subconscious and strength of will against any potential opposition.

"The Dreamwaker stood on the line between dreams and reality and used the Reverie's nature against Valenth's. No one was there to counter the effort with one of their own, or convince him that it was an impossible feat and interrupt the ritual, and so the two worlds began to merge, starting with Chimre and Mimore and spreading outwards. Had everything gone as planned, there would have been no Veil at all in the end, merely a single planet and plane... a marriage of dreams and reality. But something on *Valenth*-- something with enormous presence and an *unprecedented* amount of energy-- halted the process before it finished.

"Now, the material plane has decreased in size while the Reverie has inherited the pieces of Valenth that were pulled into the Veil during its expansion. The regions which were swallowed by the Veil are now part of the land of dreams, and have sprung into being around Stasia's perimeter. That's where we are now-- a place that was once South Dreamsong, but is part of the region now known as the Faerie Circle by the inhabitants of the Reverie."

Elliot pulled up her knees, resting her arms and head atop them with wide eyes; her mind reeled with the enormity of what her dragon had just explained to her.
It was a lot-- far too much-- to take in at once, and she'd need to have a better understanding before she could write proper notes and archive the information for the Somnambulist Project, and...

A sudden, startling realization sent a chill down her spine. "...Vigil, this is incredible, but how do you know *so much about it?* I know you were born here, and you've been here for months, but this sounds an awful lot like insider information. Were you there when the Veil was first opened? Do you know someone who was?"

“Elliot,” Vigil said softly, gesturing to the city of Axl standing before them, a mess of snaking vines, crashed ships, and creaking docks surrounded by a black and foaming sea.

Chapter XXI - Axl

- Chapter XXII - The Little Mir
- Chapter XXIII - Typikin
- Chapter XXIV - The Silent Herald
- Chapter XXV - A Celebration in Dreams!
- Chapter XXVI - Cracks in the Facade
- Chapter XXVII - Strays
- Chapter XXVIII - Drop the Fox
- Chapter XXIX - Closing Time
- Chapter XXX - Big Fish

- Chapter XXXI - Gilded Eagle